

A promotional poster for the Marvel series Runaways. The background is a vibrant, stylized illustration of the five main characters running through a city street at sunset. From left to right: Nico Minoru (a boy with a baseball bat), Karolina Danvers (a girl with long blonde hair), Molly Hernandez (a girl with short dark hair), Alex Wilder (a boy with a baseball bat), and Gert Yorkes (a girl with a baseball bat). A large, roaring dinosaur is visible in the background on the right. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and purple, with palm trees silhouetted against it. The overall style is comic book-inspired with bold colors and dynamic poses.

**MARVEL**

# RUNAWAYS

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL

*New York Times Best-Selling Author*

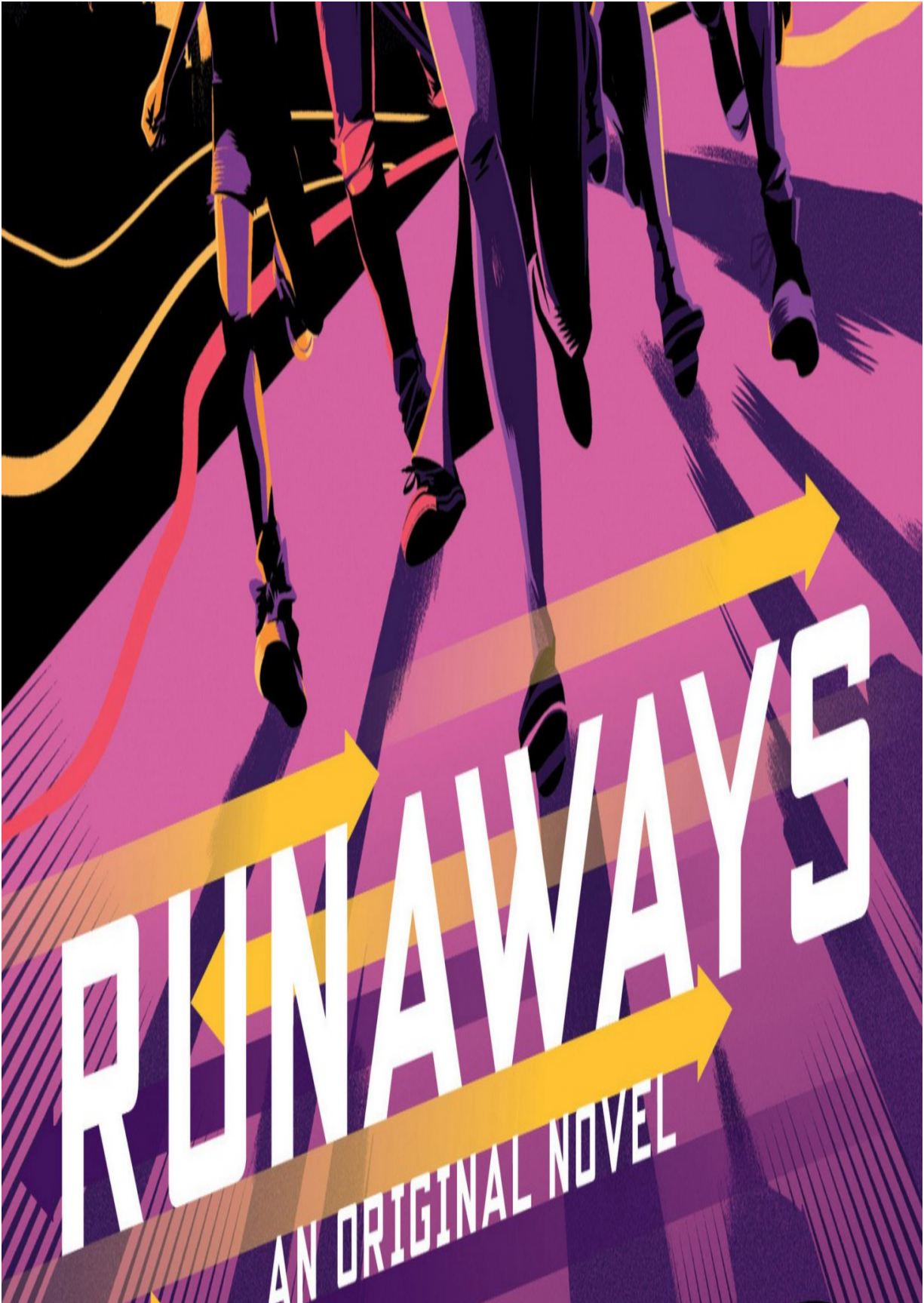
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**RUIN**

**AN ORIGINAL NOVEL**

**BY CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN**





LOS ANGELES • NEW YORK



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Runaways #1

About the Author





FOR MY SON DANIEL  
MY FELLOW OLD-SCHOOL RUNAWAYS FAN







**N**ico Minoru woke up alone in a dusty room from a dream in which she'd been watching her parents help murder a teenage girl. Her heart was thundering in her chest, her breath catching, and the mask of confidence she always wore shattered. Her right hand shook as she covered her mouth and slid even lower into the sofa where she'd fallen asleep. She steadied her breath, slowed her heart, forced the expression of naked horror on her face to subside into nothing. Confidence. Competence. Calm. Nico.

The dream didn't come every night. Not anymore. But every time, it hit her the same, whether it had been three nights or two weeks since the last one, because the scene unfolding in her dream wasn't just a nightmare....It was a memory. She'd stood with her friends, who'd barely been her friends then, and they'd watched their parents murder that girl. Nico had seen the knife go in, seen the blood and the little *O* of pain and surprise formed by the girl's lips, and the bottomless sadness in her eyes as her life had slipped away.



Then she had run. She and her friends—they'd all run away.

Their parents were all dead now, but in a way they would be running from that moment forever, like their lives were one big haunted house they all shared, and that murdered girl wandered its halls as the ghost of everything they'd thought their lives might be.

Nico sat up, and the book she'd been reading tumbled off her lap to the floor. She picked it up, scowling in disgust. She didn't have room in her life now for sorrow or self-pity. All she'd wanted this morning was a little peace and quiet, but she had not slept well last night, and so when she'd come upstairs for some alone time, some time to read her book, she'd drifted off instead.

*No more naps, she promised herself. I don't ever want to sleep again.*



If there was a bright side to having dead parents, it was being able to sit inside all day reading gloomy Scandinavian mystery novels. When she'd adopted a neo-goth style, changing her clothes and makeup, she'd heard whispers behind her back at school—and some obnoxious comments to her face—suggesting that it was anything from a poseur facade to a cry for help, but all she'd been doing then and now was letting her exterior finally reveal the interior. She'd always been a girl who liked to sit inside and read novels about grim murders. The fact that she now got to do that very thing inside an abandoned insane asylum only made it that much better.

Rancho Los Hermanos Hospital had been closed for fourteen years, surrounded by corrugated metal fencing topped with barbed wire. Inside, the walls were covered with graffiti, and the evidence of vandalism was scattered

everywhere, but the layer of dust that covered even the freshest graffiti was a decade old. Nobody had dared to come to this nuthouse in ages, mostly because after its closure, the former Hydra safe house in the subbasement of the place had been seized by S.H.I.E.L.D., who'd kept it running for a while before budget cuts had caused the whole thing to be shut down.

The squatters and street kids and junkies who tended to break into places like this had been kept away in the S.H.I.E.L.D. days by a subsonic aversion signal broadcast from every corner of the building. Thanks to Chase, they'd managed to get that signal turned back on, and it worked like a charm, causing anyone who came too close to feel a subconscious discomfort and the desire to be somewhere else. If only she'd had one of those back when she'd still been forced to go to high school every day. Hell, she'd have liked one as far back as the third grade.

If you knew it was there, and could endure feeling squirrely and irritable for the first few hours, you could get used to the aversion signal. Now Nico and her friends had the nuthouse and the half-stripped-of-equipment S.H.I.E.L.D. safe house in the subbasement all to themselves. It wasn't cozy downstairs, but there was power and running water, and they had beds to sleep in. It was a place to crash, a place they could be together without people trying to drag them back into the loving arms of Child Protective Services.

*Thanks to Chase*, she thought. It made her smile to think of how much she and the others owed to Chase Stein. Even when she'd had a crush on him, she knew her interest had been purely shallow. Cute, sure. Hair a little too long, kind of broody, slightly older than she was, the kind of guy who would definitely have drawn her attention at school—yes to all of that. But she'd never thought of Chase as especially brilliant. And yet he had been the one to find them this place, and the one before that, and the one before that, determined to keep them all together.



Yeah, Nico and the others owed Chase a lot. Though she figured they'd paid him back many times over by keeping him alive. Nico, Karolina, and Molly had powers. Gert had a psychic bond with Old Lace, her genetically engineered dinosaur from the future. Chase had a toolbox and a hacker's instincts, and he'd been loyal to them. Even after he'd turned eighteen, old enough that he could've stopped being a runaway and gotten himself a job and a life without worrying about ending up in jail or foster care, he'd stuck by them. Nico knew part of the reason was that Chase had totally fallen for Gert, but she didn't think that was the only reason.

The five of them were in this together, and Chase believed that as much as anyone.



Karolina lay on her back on a beach towel, eyes closed and half-asleep. If anyone had suggested to her a year ago that she'd be able to go through the things she'd been through, end up sunbathing on the roof of an abandoned mental hospital, and still be able to feel a sense of peace in her soul, she'd have laughed. Her life had changed so dramatically. Her parents had brought her up to respect and care for the less fortunate, but they'd also given her a life of rare privilege. They'd both been actors, absurdly attractive, and she'd inherited those genes. Obviously.

They weren't human genes, of course, so it was a bit like cheating. Karolina was still trying—and failing—to get used to the idea that her parents had come from another world, that she herself was an alien. In her mind that meant little green nighttime abductors like the ones you saw in the movies. But a little green nighttime abductor wouldn't look nearly as good in a bikini as she did. Or feel tormented by the discovery of their otherness the way she did.

Sunbathing, though...this felt good. She'd found the tiny bikini and a few old beach towels in a Salvation Army store. Karolina had never needed to worry about money before she'd learned the truth about her parents, but she'd risen to the challenge of bargain hunting. Bikini acquired, she'd scouted the hospital's roof for the best spot to avoid any chance of being seen, and left the world behind. As with others of her race, the Majesdanians, Karolina absorbed solar radiation and stored it in her cells. She could repurpose it in a variety of ways, which made lying there baking in the sunshine extra pleasurable. Though the bracelet she wore allowed her to suppress the colorful lights that emanated from her whenever she used her powers, she could still feel her body charging with the sunlight, flowing with a sense of well-being that nothing else could provide.

Karolina drifted, content and sleepy and relaxed for the first time in—

“Hey, Karolina, when do you think I'll get boobs?”

Blinking, thoughts fuzzy from near-sleep, she opened her eyes. Even with her sunglasses on, the glare was bright. She tilted her head to the right and saw eleven-year-old Molly Hayes sitting on her own beach towel, a blue-and-red thing with Captain Marvel on it. Molly loved Captain Marvel, partly because she could punch really hard, but also because whenever they saw news footage of her she seemed like a boss, and Molly liked the idea. Molly could also punch really hard, and if Captain Marvel could be a boss, she figured maybe she could be a boss someday too.

When Karolina had showed her the towel, that day after she'd gone into the Salvation Army store, Molly had squealed with happiness.

“Wait,” Karolina said now, “did you just ask me about boobs?”

Molly pointed at Karolina's chest. “When do you think I'll get them?”

Karolina sat up, fully awake now. "It's different for everyone, I guess. Could be this year. Could be a slow thing. Might take a long time. Sorry I can't be more—"

"Do they get in the way?"

"In the way of what?"

Molly shrugged. "Just...in the way. Gert said hers hurt sometimes when she runs, and that just seems stupid. Like, who designed boobs anyway? I know you're gonna bring up moms nursing babies, but what if I never have babies? I think they should only grow when you want to have a baby. I mean, obviously boys like them, but who really cares what boys like?"

Karolina smiled. "On that, we can definitely agree. But look, Mol, we all grow the way we're meant to. Tall or short, curvy or not, it's more important what's between your ears than—"

"Nico's boobs aren't very big. Maybe I'll get boobs like hers. So they won't hurt when I run."

Karolina couldn't help but laugh. Molly crossed her arms and gave her a withering glare.

"I'm going to guess that you're bored," Karolina said, rising from her towel.

Molly threw up her hands. "Yes. Definitely. And you know the solution to boredom? Mint chocolate chip ice cream."

"I think we can arrange..." Karolina began, but her words trailed off and she turned to look across the roof, beyond the vent housing and the stairwell entrances and the massive air-conditioning units and chimneys.

"Kar, what's wrong?" Molly asked, and Karolina heard her scuffling to her feet.

"Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

Karolina tried to explain, but realized Molly couldn't have felt the same thing she did. The sensation came from within her, a kind of heat in her flesh and bones, as if the solar radiation inside her was being amplified and somehow



siphoned at the same time. Just a little, in a manner so small that she wouldn't have noticed if she'd been distracted by almost anything else.

"Stay here," she said.

"*Pfft*. You know how good I am with being told to *stay here*."

A moment later they were padding across the roof together, foolishly barefoot on the old roof, but not wanting the noise of their flip-flops to give them away. The sun had heated the roof, so it seared the soles of their feet, but Molly was a trouper.

"It's getting hotter," the younger girl said. "And it's not just the sun."

Karolina didn't reply, but she knew Molly was right. Whatever she'd sensed, whatever had gotten her attention, it was raising the temperature at the back of the hospital.

They reached the edge of the roof. Keeping low, side by side, the girls looked over the side. Karolina's eyes went wide and her breath hitched in her chest, but it was Molly who spoke up.

"Oh, crap."

"Yeah," Karolina agreed.

Someone had melted a hole through the back fence. The hole was about seven feet high and three feet wide. About the right size for someone, or something, to walk right in. Karolina hung her head farther over the side of the roof. She couldn't be sure, but she thought maybe there was another hole below them, burned right through the outer wall of the hospital.

Whatever had come to find the Runaways, it was already inside.

As she jumped up, she slipped off her bracelet and a rainbow of light began to glow from within her. Sparks and streaks of light wreathed and danced around her body.

"Molly—"

"Don't say it."

Karolina glanced at her. Sometimes Molly seemed very young, but they had all been through a lot and she'd been forced to grow up quickly. She was also a mutant, and the strongest among them. The urge to keep her out of danger was strong, but they couldn't afford to leave her behind.

"Let's go," Karolina said.

Molly threw her fist in the air. "Yes!"

Karolina grabbed her and dove off the roof, taking flight in a wave of vividly colored light, no longer caring who might see them. She carried Molly with her, praying that she was doing the right thing and that they were strong enough to face whatever had come to hurt them.

She didn't think she could handle losing anyone else.



*The five of us*, Nico thought. Once upon a time there'd been six of them. Six Runaways. It was like that in her head—capitalized. They weren't just runaways, they were *the* Runaways, like the all-girl punk band. Not a Super Hero team or anything like that. Their parents had been criminals, an alliance of evil nasties who'd called themselves the Pride. They'd been a disparate group, each of whom brought different strengths to the table, and each of whom had been recruited for supposed greatness by the Gibborim, a trio of Elder Gods of the Earth who promised the usual bells-and-whistles package of immortality, power, and wealth in exchange for one ritual human sacrifice a year.

They hadn't been Super Villains. They'd been murderers. Serial killers who'd basically worshipped the Gibborim, even though the Gibborim had an endgame. They were trapped in a pocket dimension and needed to accumulate the power generated by those annual sacrifices to get back to the real world. The Pride had been organized-crime figures, a kind of enhanced L.A. cartel, so feared that every criminal kicked a

percentage of profits up the chain to the Pride, and nobody with nefarious intent dared to operate in the greater Los Angeles area without their blessing.

No, the Runaways weren't Super Heroes any more than their parents had been Super Villains. They had responsibilities, things they believed in, a reason for helping people, especially kids like themselves, street punks who'd gotten in over their heads or who had parents doing them wrong. They weren't just fighting crime to fight crime, they were trying to survive, and maybe make up for some of the horrors their parents had been responsible for. To them, that was enough.

*The five of us*, she thought again. Because they'd lost the guy they'd all thought of as their leader, Alex Wilder, under circumstances none of them wanted to talk about. They'd defeated the Pride, yes. And their parents had died in the process. They weren't just Runaways now, they were also orphans.

Nico missed the life she'd had before, when the worst thing in her world had been the daily frustrations she wrote about in purple and red ink in a black journal, letting her clothing declare to the world just how misunderstood she felt. And yet she wouldn't have wanted to go back to that time. She knew some of her friends wished they could return to the innocence of those days, but she couldn't say the same. If they'd never learned the truth, the Pride would still be running their secret criminal empire in L.A., still worshipping the Gibborim and murdering kids no older than their own children. Her parents had gotten what was coming to them.

So why did she have to fight not to cry sometimes, late at night, when she knew everyone else had gone to sleep? Why did she have these nightmares?

With one finger holding the page in her book, Nico exhaled loudly and gazed around the dayroom. Ratty armchairs, three torn and stained sofas, a few wheelchairs,

and two broken Ping-Pong tables were about all the room had to offer. Dust motes floated all around her, invisible except in the shafts of sunlight that poured through the windows in the west wall. It was late afternoon and the light had taken on a golden hue. Two of the windows had been boarded up, but there were five that remained unblocked. They were dirty and had barred grates that would have kept angry inmates from shattering the glass. Several had broken panes, no doubt the result of rocks tossed over the fence outside or from vandals who'd gotten inside, back in those early years after the closure.

A quiet place. Perfectly gloomy. Nico settled back on the sofa she'd chosen days ago as her reading spot and focused again on the page. Her thoughts had drifted, so she had to read page 117 again. The best thing about these Scandinavian crime novels was that no matter how warm and humid it might get, she could still get a chill up her spine reading them.

She'd only reached page 119 when she started to shift on the couch. Beads of sweat sheened her arms and she wiped a hand across her forehead. The warm breeze through the broken windowpanes had died and suddenly it felt like the whole room had turned into an oven.

"What the hell?" she muttered.

Still holding her page with one finger, she started to rise. Halfway to her feet she froze, sure that she'd heard footsteps from the corridor at the back of the patients' dayroom. A frisson of fear went up her spine. None of them ever went into that part of the hospital. There were treatment rooms back there, and then the rear section of the building. Once they'd made certain it was clear of squatters, they'd had no reason to explore any farther. The emergency exits back there had been sealed. Even if someone had managed to pry one open, with the aversion signal broadcasting, nobody would enter the building without a purpose strong enough to override that



subconscious buzz. Squatters and vandals and teenage partiers were out of the question.

Baking in the new heat, Nico turned just as a man entered the room.

No. Not a man. An asshole in a costume. White with a red pair of boots and gloves and mask. A red starburst or flare or something on his chest. Some kind of folding material under his arms that clearly functioned as gliding wings. Heat came off the guy in waves. He had those opaque eye coverings that always freaked her out, made it impossible to know if the person in the mask was looking at you. But when the asshole swiveled his head in her direction, she had no doubt. Chase would probably know who he was—the Pride’s files on the city’s costumed class were extensive, and he had been studying them—but Nico drew a blank.

“I have no idea who you are or how the hell you found us —” she began.

“Found you? From the looks of you, kid, nobody’s looking.”

Nico had one hand behind her back. She drew out the small, sharp blade she kept sheathed there and pressed its edge against the skin of her left forearm. A quick cut, and the Staff of One would emerge.

“That’s just hurtful,” she said, pressing the blade to her flesh.

The asshole threw up his hands, and a flash filled the room, so bright that Nico cried out and turned away, covering her eyes. She staggered backward, bumped the sofa, and fell over it. Groaning from the pain in her eyes, she scrambled along the floor, taking cover behind the furniture. Shielding her eyes with a hand, she opened them to find the glare had died down, but that her vision blurred and everything had turned into washed-out, ghostly hues around her. A flicker of panic went through her as she wondered if the damage to her eyes would be permanent, but now wasn’t the time.

Her Scandinavian crime novel lay on the floor in front of the sofa, and now she was really pissed. The jackass had made her lose her page.

Heat cooked the room, so insufferable now that the air seared her lungs as she breathed in, but that bright flare had faded. Still blinking, squinting, eyes hurting, she poked her head around the sofa and saw that the man was gone. He'd left behind a massive hole in the floor, its edges melted and scorched, and flickering with little bits of ragged flame.

The subbasement. Maybe he hadn't come for them at all. Maybe he wanted something in the old S.H.I.E.L.D./Hydra base down there. Trouble was, it wasn't just dusty old tech stored far beneath her feet.

Gert and Chase were down there.

Nico glanced around, vision clearing, and spotted her little knife. She snatched it up and sliced a cut into her arm. That was all it took for her power to manifest, for her magic to come out. A little bloodletting, and the Staff of One slid out of her body, another sliver of impossibility in a world where the impossible happened every day. She drew the staff out of her chest like Arthur drawing the sword from the stone.

More bright light flared at the back of the room, from the same corridor where the asshole had emerged, but this light danced and swirled in a vivid carnival of colors, and Nico felt a surge of relief. Whatever happened next, she wouldn't face it alone.

Karolina flew into the room with Molly in her arms. Molly was already complaining that she wanted to be put down, that she wasn't a baby or something. Karolina obliged, and the two stood side by side, staring first at the hole melted in the floor and then at Nico.


"I'm guessing he came this way," Karolina said.

Molly rolled her eyes. "What gave it away?"

Nico marched over to the edge of the hole, blood dripping from her arm. "I suppose if I'm the leader of this team now, I should have some quips like they do on TV. But I'm not a girl who quips."

"So let's go kick his butt before he hurts our friends," Molly said, pounding a fist into her opposite palm to demonstrate. It should've looked silly, but there was nothing amusing about it at all. Not with the power behind that fist.

"Good plan," Nico replied. "One less asshole."



## TWO

**G**ertrude Yorkes liked being kissed. More precisely, she liked being kissed by Chase. All her life, she'd had too many thoughts crowding her head. That had been true even before the crazy twists her life had taken, and it was truer than ever now. She worried about the future. Hell, she worried about tonight. How long could they stay in this base? What would happen if they ran out of food? She worried about the police. More than anything, though, she worried about what would happen now that the Pride were no longer controlling the criminal underworld of Los Angeles. Their deaths had left a power vacuum, and everything she and the others had learned recently indicated that dozens of criminal organizations were rushing in to try to fill that vacuum. People were killing each other to try to take control of the L.A. dark side, and in a way, Gert and the other Runaways were to blame. She worried that they all felt they had to do something about it, and she worried that they weren't up to the task.

But when Chase was kissing her, Gert didn't worry about anything at all.

His lips were softer than she'd imagined. And she had imagined them, more than once. Every time he kissed her, she was surprised, as if it were the first time. She wanted to be the kind of girl who could be relaxed with her boyfriend. She wanted to reveal that sweet, soft part of her heart, and tell him about the way his lips surprised her. She wanted to be cool enough and confident enough to throw that information out as if it meant nothing, or as if it meant everything.

But Gert didn't have the courage. She could stand up to street thugs or Super Villains or frickin' alien invaders, but she couldn't share her secret heart with a guy she just might be in love with. That worried her, too.

Fortunately, Chase kept kissing her, and the worries went away for a little while. His hand slid along her hip, and she pushed her fingers through his hair then started laughing softly against his mouth. He pulled away, staring stupidly at her.

"I'm on the verge of being offended."

Gert pushed herself onto an elbow, sliding out from underneath him so they were side by side on one of the reclined seats inside the *Leapfrog*, the ship they used to get around the city. Still snickering, she shook her head.

"Don't be offended. Okay, maybe be offended. I was just thinking about the mean jokes I used to make about your hair. Behind your back, of course."

Chase grinned. "What's wrong with my hair? You love my hair. My hair is sexy."

"Your hair is absolutely not sexy. It's long and a mess. It's like somebody murdered you, took your perfectly good skull, and dragged it over the branches and grass and leaves around the crime scene."

Feigning shock, Chase reached out and messed up Gert's own purple hair.



“First of all, in this scenario are you the one murdering me? And second of all, I prefer the word ‘tousled’ to describe this mess on top of my head. At least I shower every day.”

Gert sniffed and adjusted her glasses. “I don’t need to shower every day. Also, yes, I’ll murder you. But only if you ask nicely.”

He let out a laugh and then pouted. “Not sexy, huh?”

“No.” She reached out and pushed her fingers through his hair again. Cupping the back of his skull, she drew him toward her. “But adorable.”

“And ‘adorable’ is your type?”

Gert kissed him, banishing her worries again. The *Leapfrog* wasn’t the most comfortable place to fool around, but it was the most likely place to find Chase. Whenever he wasn’t eating or sleeping, he could nearly always be found working on the *Frog*, trying to find a permanent fix for the frequently malfunctioning stealth mode or teaching himself how to maintain its systems properly. His tech-genius parents had built it, and Chase had to reverse-engineer anything he wanted to understand. He might seem kind of a mess, with that tornado-swept hair and a fashion style that always looked like an unmade bed, but he had a keen eye for how things worked.

You’d think a guy like that could work the snap on a bra with one hand, but nope.

She started snickering again, and then it turned into giggles. Laughing in disbelief, Chase sat up and moved over to the next seat.

“All right, look, I like a laugh as much as the next guy, but you keep this up and I’m gonna need therapy to repair the damage you’re doing to my self-image.”

“No, no...” she started. But the look on his face got her giggling again, laughing in a way she couldn’t remember doing since she and Janey Portis had a giggle fit in seventh-grade social studies.

Chase exhaled, a serene sort of smile on his face. He gazed at her so adoringly in that moment that it killed her giggles instantly.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s just nice, Gert. I mean...I’ve known you most of my life. Yeah, we saw each other once a year, and then all the stuff with our parents came out. In all the time I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you laugh like that. I feel like I’ve never seen you actually happy before.”

The words closed her down. Somehow here in the *Leapfrog*, kissing Chase, she could pretend that none of the horrible stuff had ever happened. Like they were back at Alex Wilder’s house and had snuck off together and hidden in Mr. Wilder’s car in the garage just so they could be alone. That had never happened, but as much as she’d have denied it—as often as she’d wanted to punch Chase in his stupid face—Gert had wished for it.

“I’m not supposed to be happy?” she said, sitting up and crossing her arms. She had all her clothes on—she wanted to take things slow, and Chase wouldn’t dare push her—but still she felt naked.

Chase frowned. “Where did you get that? I literally just said how great it is to see you like this. Or...like that, I guess. ‘Cause you definitely do not look happy right now. What’d I say?”

She stared at him, wishing she had an answer. Wishing she could explain the things that triggered her, the parents who’d always seemed so disappointed with her, even when they said all the things parents were supposed to say. Time-traveler-from-the-future parents, though she didn’t know it at the time.

“Gert,” he said, reaching for her hand.

“I’m fine.” She shifted on the seat, avoiding his touch. “I think I’m just tired. And hungry. You want to get something to eat?”

“Don’t I always?” Chase replied. He gave her his trademark goofy expression, but she knew him well enough now to see the haunted cast of his eyes and knew she was responsible. He had just as many issues as she did. They were both broken people. Hell, all of the Runaways were.

Gert reached out and took his hand. Who was she kidding? Everyone she’d ever met was broken in some way. Wasn’t that the whole circle of life, spending your days trying to repair the parts that were broken?

*Listen to yourself*, she thought. *Wise beyond your years. Seriously, what do you know?*

Oh, the conversations she had with herself because she didn’t dare say the scary things out loud.

“Come on, goofball,” she said, and together they moved to the *Leapfrog’s* hatch. It was a weird little ship with robotic legs powerful enough to launch it into the air, where it could glide but not technically *fly*. Gert thought it was the stupidest conveyance she’d ever seen. If Chase’s parents were such geniuses, they’d have built something less absurd. Of course, she’d never tell Chase that.

She pulled the release lever, and the hatch hissed open. She started to climb out of the *Frog*, hesitated, and turned back to give Chase a kiss, just to let him know things were okay between them. But Chase wasn’t looking at her. He was looking past her, with fear in his eyes.

She turned, saw the white-and-red-costumed guy with fire in his hands, and she swore.

“It’s Sunstroke,” Chase said.

“Who the hell is—” Gert started.

Chase grabbed her around the waist and dragged her with him as he jumped back into the *Leapfrog*, just as it was enveloped by a blast of fire. Alarms sounded inside the vehicle as the hatch slid closed so swiftly she was glad they hadn’t been caught in the way. Seats caught fire and started to melt. Gert scrambled up into the cockpit with Chase, mostly to get away from burning things.

“Fire! Do you not see the fire?” she snapped as he flicked switches on the control panel.

Nozzles appeared in the ceiling. With a hiss, white mist sprayed down on the flames, coating the seats and everything around them in a foam that looked like shaving cream. With a puff of smoke and the acrid odor of burning plastic, the flames went out.

“Did you—”

“Automatic. My boy protects himself,” Chase said, but by then he had the wheel of the *Leapfrog* in his hands and the engine whining. “Strap in!”

“Fine, but spill the details. Sunstroke is who, now?”

The *Frog* rocked to one side. Fans blew cold air into Gert’s face, but the flame buffeting the outer hull made the inside of the vehicle feel like an oven. Alarms kept screaming inside as she latched her seat belt.

“Last week we stopped those two idiots in costumes robbing the All-Nite Diner—”

“Yeah. Kids with no powers playing Super Villain. This guy definitely has powers.”

“Don’t you remember? They said the Crimson Cowl was in L.A. putting together a new Masters of Evil.”

“Right,” Gert said. “They thought they were auditioning or something.”

The alarms were giving her a headache. She had spent enough time inside the *Leapfrog* by now and glanced around at the dashboard instruments that were flashing, took half a second to figure out which one controlled the alarms, and reached out to punch the button. The inside of the *Frog* fell silent.

“Thank you!” Chase said as the *Frog* surged upward onto its legs.

But other alarms were going off outside the vehicle. The dim industrial lights in the base had shut down, but the whole place strobed with white and blue emergency

lighting. Claxons blared as if in warning of an imminent attack, but the attack wasn't imminent. It was here.

"You think Sunstroke's part of this new Masters of Evil?" Gert asked.

"One of the All-Nite Diner morons said he'd heard a few names. Whirlwind. Scorpion. Sunstroke. All rumor, but here's Sunstroke. Seems like a big coincidence."

Chase turned the *Frog* around. A wave of fire crashed over them, blasting the windshield with such force that Gert pressed herself back into her seat. The heat seals held, but the seams around the fireproof glass started to smoke.

"Damn it!" Chase said. "We've gotta get out of here!"

"What about the others?" Gert said, heart hammering in her chest. "We can't just leave them."

"They're all upstairs. Either we get up there to help them —"

"Or he went through them to get to us and they're beyond help."

Chase shot her a frightened look, his face going pale. "Let's go."

"What about Old Lace? She's still locked up down below. I can't—"

"We'll come back for her as soon as we've checked on the others. If we don't go now, Sunstroke's going to melt the *Frog*, and us with it!"

Gert nodded and scanned the controls again. Only three days ago, Chase had shown her how he'd routed some of the vital controls for their new base into the *Leapfrog's* systems. Nodding as the memory came back, she tapped a dash screen, entered a command code, and then sat back to wait for the overhead hangar door to slide open. The mental hospital had a shaft right down its center so a typical S.H.I.E.L.D. craft could ascend or descend—or in the *Frog's* case, jump—through.

The door didn't open.

"Chase—"

"I know." He sighed, sweat beading up on his face.  
"Lasers it is."

Flipping the toggle on the steering column, Chase opened fire. Through the fire and smoke, Gert could see the white-and-red silhouette of the intruder. The lasers tore up the floor in front of him, and Sunstroke leaped out of the way, gliding on the strange fabric wings under his arms. Heat shimmered off the floor beneath him, and he alighted a dozen feet farther back from the *Leapfrog*. Around him, sofas and chairs that they'd dragged into the base's hangar bay ignited in flames from the heat of his presence alone.

"Give me audio," Gert said, "and then blast him again."

Chase didn't ask why, just hit a button to open the audio channel to the outside speakers, and then fired the lasers at Sunstroke again, ripping up more concrete. The guy dodged again and then spun, a ball of fire beginning to form above his right hand, like he was forging a baby sun.

"Dial it back a second, Sunstroke," Gert said, her voice echoing throughout the hangar bay.

Sunstroke started walking toward the *Leapfrog*. He thrust out his arms, hurling fresh fire at them. The windshield started smoking—not just the seams, but the glass itself.

"That means cease fire, you clown!" Gert shouted.

"What are you doing?" Chase asked. "Does he look like a guy who *ceases* fire?"

"I just wanna know if he's after us or if he's looking for something. Guy's a Super Villain, right? This used to be a Hydra base, before S.H.I.E.L.D.—"

"You know I can hear you, right?" Sunstroke said.

Gert and Chase looked at each other, and then Gert stared out the windshield. Sunstroke stood fifteen feet in front of the *Leapfrog*—where Chase could not have missed him if he used the lasers now.

"Yeah. Of course we know that," Gert said. "So what the hell's your crisis? Because if you came hunting us, we have



no problem keeping this cross fire going. But if you're working for the Crimson Cowl, maybe we can do business."

Chase arched a curious eyebrow, but he didn't interrupt her. The *Leapfrog's* shields couldn't take much more, and they both knew it.

"I don't know who you are," Sunstroke said, the voice almost spooky coming from behind a mask that covered his mouth. "But you're telling me you want in on the new Masters of Evil?"

Gert cringed. Masters of Evil was *such* a stupid name.

"We wanted to claim this place for the Crimson Cowl," she said, thinking fast. "A lot of power players are making a move in L.A. right now, and she's going to come out on top. We figured if we gift wrapped this base for her and handed it over, we could make a good impression."

"Smart kids," Sunstroke said. "But just kids, in the weirdest-looking robot car I've seen, or whatever the hell that is. The Cowl had this place in her files. She sent me to scope it out. She doesn't need you."

"Justine Hammer's dead," Chase said. "So I'm gonna assume this Crimson Cowl is someone else. But if you think —"

Gert whacked him in the leg to shush him, then leaned forward so Sunstroke could see her through the windshield. "We know this base better than anyone. You've already done enough damage, and you're going to need to repair it if you want to avoid pissing her off. We could help."

"Or I could just kill you," Sunstroke said, taking another step toward the *Frog*. "This is no kid's game. And if the Cowl's going to use this base, it's a bad way to start if people already know she's here."

"Yet you're still talking," Gert said. "Which I'm gonna guess means you're not thrilled by the idea of killing kids. So our friends upstairs are still alive?"

Sunstroke tilted his head. Even through the mask, she could see the confusion in his expression. "I saw one girl.

You're saying there are more?"

Gert smiled. Chase bent over the controls, ready to fire the lasers.

"Definitely more than one girl," Gert said.

Behind Sunstroke, rainbow fireworks showered down through the hole he'd left in the ceiling—the reason for Gert's smile—and then Karolina appeared, flying through the scorched, melted hole. She had Molly dangling from one hand and Nico from the other, straining to carry them but managing. The claxons kept clanging as Karolina released their hands and the girls dropped to the concrete floor, landing on their feet. Nico stumbled a bit, but Molly seemed to be running even before she touched ground.

Sunstroke started to turn in their direction, concerned now about how many of them might have been upstairs.

"All right, dumbass," Chase said. "You don't wanna team up, I guess we have to finish this."

He fired the lasers. Sunstroke dodged and leaped, sailing aloft on waves of heat, even as a fresh swirl of fire began to manifest in his hands. In the midst of it all, he didn't see Karolina until she had flown right by him. She reached out one hand and hit him with a blast of solar radiation that made him cry out in pain and surprise. Sunstroke went tumbling through the air like a discarded rag doll, but when he struck the ground he was already in motion. He rolled, got to his knees, started to rise—

Molly reached him in three more strides. Sunstroke just had time to look at her, to see an eleven-year-old girl in an oversize T-shirt and gym shorts running at him. He had enough time for a dismissive scowl to form on his lips, and then Molly hammered him in the chest. She struck the supernova symbol on his costume as if it'd been her target all along, and he toppled backward, arms out-flung, and went sprawling on the concrete.

"Stay down, jerkface!" Molly declared, as if it were her battle cry.

In the *Leapfrog*, Chase cackled. “Oh my God, how awesome is she?”

“She drives you crazy,” Gert reminded him.

“Yeah, but come on. ‘Stay down, jerkface’ is adorable.”

“Don’t tell *her* that, or you’ll be the next jerkface she’s knocking out.”

But Gert was grinning, too. At least until she saw Sunstroke getting up, saw the fire reigniting in his hands. Then she hit the switch for the external speakers again and started to shout a warning, before she saw there was no need.

Nico stepped into the space between Sunstroke and Molly, cool and calm as a shadow. She raised the Staff of One and barked a single word. Not just a word, but a magical spell.

*“Blackout!”*

The fire churning in Sunstroke’s hands vanished. The air around him seemed to dim; he took a single staggering step toward Nico, and passed out. He’d have fallen into her arms, but Nico stepped aside and let him hit the floor. The *whoomp* of impact could be heard even inside the *Leapfrog*.



Nico stared down at the unconscious man. Her spell hadn’t just snuffed out his powers—temporarily, she assumed—it had made *him* black out. A happy side effect, considering it meant he wouldn’t have to suffer the indignity of Molly smashing him through a wall.

She glanced up at Karolina. “You still charged up? I was a little worried my spell would turn out your lights, too.”

Karolina smiled and made a swirl of colorful light dance around her fingers as she and Molly approached. “I’m good.”

With a hiss, the hatch on the *Leapfrog* opened and Gert jumped down, followed by Chase.

Nico crouched by their intruder. "Anybody recognize the costume?"

"Sunstroke," Gert said. "Chase says he's one of the new 'Masters of Evil.'"

You could practically hear the mocking air quotes around the phrase. Nico smiled thinly.

"Masters of Evil might be totally goofy—"

"Oh, yeah," Molly said. "That's just dumb. It might work on *Doctor Who*."

"—but that doesn't make these guys any less dangerous," Nico continued. "He could've killed any one of us. Or all of us."

"I don't think he actually wanted to kill us," Gert said. "He might've, but I got the idea maybe he was reluctant to torch a bunch of teenagers."

Nico stared down at Sunstroke. He looked sort of pitiful now, lying there like a puppet with its strings cut. "Still," she said, "Masters of Evil. Or a wannabe Master of Evil. Either way, let's get him out of here before he regains consciousness."

Chase scratched the back of his head. "I don't know. Even if we tie him up, what if he comes around while we're jumping him over to the police station? If his powers aren't still blacked out, he could get away easily, possibly toasting us all on the way out."

"If he wakes up," Molly said, "I'll pummel him."

Nico huffed in frustration. She glanced at the hole Sunstroke had burned through the ceiling, then at the scorch marks on the *Leapfrog*.

"New plan," she said, scanning her friends, her gaze landing on Molly. "We'll call it in. Tell the police where to find him."

"But it's our secret base," Molly protested, yawning. Using her powers always made her sleepy. If she exerted

herself enough, she'd been known to just pass out.

"It *was* our secret base," Nico said. "And it was nice to find it after sleeping in empty warehouses and that abandoned movie theater with all the rats. But we've crashed in rough places before, and we can do it again. This guy burned his way through the hospital walls upstairs and then down here. Our base isn't secret anymore."

"Plus, apparently the Crimson Cowl knows about this place and wants it for herself," Chase added.

Molly sighed and looked up at Karolina, taking her hand. "Why can't anyplace be home, just for a little while?"

Karolina's colorful lights faded, and she was just a teenager again. "We'll find our way, Molly. We always do."

Nico felt a pang in her heart, but she had to ignore it. If she was supposed to lead, she couldn't let her emotions get in the way. She didn't have time to comfort Molly—or anyone else—right now.

"Okay," she said. "Pack up your stuff. Get whatever food's in the kitchen and load it into the *Frog*. Pillows and blankets, whatever we can salvage in five minutes. Chase, I'll stay with Sunstroke till you've got your things together, and then you can watch him while I—"

"Go on and get your stuff, Nico," Chase said. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I'm actually already packed up and ready to go."

Nico caught the hurt glance Gert gave him. Confused and worried.

"You want to explain that?"

This time, Chase smiled. He glanced around the tight little circle of Runaways—tighter than they'd been before Alex had left them, bonded by the ugliness they'd endured together.

"I don't, actually," Chase replied. "Why don't you and Gert and Karolina change? The three of you get the night off. Once we make sure this guy is taken care of, you can go

dancing at Howl, blow off some steam, and then later tonight I'll have a surprise for you all."

Nico narrowed her eyes. Karolina tilted her head, studying Chase like he was some new species of boy they hadn't seen before. But it was Gert who took a step closer to him.

"Don't you know by now?" Gert said. "We don't like surprises."

"Yeah!" Molly said, hands on hips as she moved up next to Gert. "Plus, you didn't say me. If these guys deserve a fun night, then why don't I?"

Chase bent so he and Molly were eye to eye, ignoring the others. "Two reasons. Number one, Howl's an under-twenty-one dance club, yeah, but you've got to be at least fifteen, and that's not you. Number two, and much more importantly...I'm going on a secret mission, and I need you with me."

Molly's glare turned suspicious. "Really?"

"Really."

She turned and faced the rest of them. "He needs me, you guys. Sorry I can't come with you. Secret mission stuff."

Nico glanced from Molly to Chase.

"What about Old Lace?" Gert asked.

"She can come on the secret mission, too," Chase promised.

Karolina knelt and prodded Sunstroke to make sure he wasn't getting up anytime soon. Then she glanced up at Nico.

"I do like to dance."

Nico exhaled. "Me too."

This time, she let herself smile.





**THREE**

**K**arolina Let the music flow through her body. The beat thrummed in her chest as if it had replaced the rhythm of her heart. She swung her head, hair flying, and surrendered herself to the current of energy rushing from body to body on the dance floor. A delicious pressure built inside her, the solar energies that powered her yearning for release. She wished she could truly give herself over to the music, let the vibrant palette of colors spill from her so that she could take flight. She imagined herself lighting up the pulsing club, flying over the heads of the dancers, and painting the air. It seemed more than likely they'd be terrified and she'd never be allowed inside Howl again, which would be far too high a price to pay for a little self-indulgence.

For now, she could only dance, but she found that dancing was enough.

Whipping her head, twisting her hips, raising her hands in the air, Karolina felt the eyes on her. Not all of them—she wasn't that vain. But there were definitely guys and girls in the club who'd found themselves intrigued by her. She'd

experienced such attentions often enough that she could almost ignore them. A quick glance around and she spotted a trio of nerdy-looking kids—two guys and a girl—who were barely dancing at all. They stood in a corner near a group of shabby, faux-velvet couches, all three of them awkward and skittish like forest animals about to bolt into the brush.

Karolina danced over to them. Over the pulse of the music, she spoke up. “You guys want to dance?”

They exchanged surprised looks. “All of us?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not about romance out here. It’s about feeling the music!”

The girl glanced shyly at the two boys and then stepped onto the dance floor. She reached back for the nearest one, so Karolina reached for the other. Seconds later, all four of them were dancing and waving their hands in the air. The DJ shouted a string of unintelligible words, and then the music shifted to something much older, some kind of ’90s hip-hop anthem, complete with vinyl scratching. Most of the kids went nuts. Even one of the geeky boys seemed to know it, shouting the words, lost in his own world now. Karolina beamed, soaking up their joy.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to see Gert dancing there. Jubilant, Karolina grabbed her hands and spun her around. Gert laughed—such a strange sight, Gert laughing—and the two of them moved across the floor in tandem. Karolina did not feel bad about hastily abandoning her adopted geek trio—they were dancing now, they were fine without her. And the marvel of a dancing, laughing Gert fascinated her. Karolina wore a slim black dress that showed off miles of leg, while Gert looked, as always, like some kind of grunge Alice in Wonderland. Her purple hair changed colors under Howl’s strobing lights, her glasses gleamed. Her tights were striped purple and white, her shorts and T-shirt ragged enough to have been dragged off a punk-rock queen, circa 1982. She was herself, always, and Karolina admired her for it.

“Why were you dancing with those three? Do you know them?” Gert shouted to be heard over the music. Even shouting, the words were mostly obliterated by the thumping sound, but Karolina got the gist.

“They looked super nervous. I wanted them to have fun.”

Gert cocked her head. “I don’t think I’ll ever get you.”

Karolina felt a twinge in her chest, not insulted but hurt. “What do you mean?”

“You *like* people! I don’t get it!”

Karolina only smiled. Around them the whole crowd started jumping straight up, hands in the air, and the two girls joined them. In all the time they’d known each other, she’d never seen Gert like this, and it did her heart good. Karolina wondered if the new relationship with Chase might be part of the reason. Maybe some of Gert’s natural emotional shielding had started to come down.

Jumping again, Karolina nearly came down on top of Nico, who had rushed in between them. In her usual goth garb, she didn’t look like anyone else in the place, but somehow also didn’t seem out of place. At Howl, nobody blinked when they spotted someone different.

“Why aren’t you—” Karolina began. She would’ve finished the sentence with *dancing*, but Nico didn’t give her the chance.

“We need to talk!” Nico grabbed each of them by a hand, hauled them through the club, and worked her way toward the back, where a gloomy corridor had been lit with dim blue light and a red exit sign. The bathrooms were back here, along with some cases of soda that everyone knew were mainly used for chasing vodka brought in by underage girls who stuffed flasks in their bras.

“Hey!” Gert snapped, and yanked her hand free. “My legs are short, remember? Slow it down a second.”

Nico stopped just past the bathrooms, glancing around as if worried they’d be overheard.

“What’s going on?” Karolina asked. Her ears were fuzzed with static, the aftereffect of the loud music, now that they were in a quieter spot. The music kept thumping, but the volume had been cut in half back here.

“I was just out front talking to this guy—”

Gert crossed her arms. “We agreed we’d leave together. You can’t just take off with some guy.”

“This is so *not* about that,” Nico huffed. “I wasn’t leaving. He’s cute, but he smokes. I told him I’d go outside with him. There are people on the street. It’s nine thirty, not three a.m. Nobody’s going to drag me off the sidewalk in front of a club that has a busy Starbucks right across the street.”

Gert nodded. “Okay, and...?”

“It’s like the smokers’ club out there. These kids were gossiping, talking about some guy they knew who went missing out of this club last week. They claim they’ve heard about other kids our age going missing, and the rumors are that *the Pride* is taking them.”

Karolina felt her blood go cold.

“That’s crazy,” Gert said. “There is no Pride. Our parents are dead. We—”

The women’s bathroom door opened ten feet away, and the three of them paused long enough for two girls to come giggling out, then shuffle back into the main club.

Gert lowered her voice and they all drew close together. “The Pride is gone. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I know that,” Nico said. “We all do. But what if one or two of them survived? Or if...I can’t believe I’m saying this, but what if the Gibborim brought them back?”

Karolina pushed her hair behind her ears, not wanting any of this to be true. “So you think the Gibborim can resurrect people?”

Nico threw up her hands. “I don’t know. Do you?”

“You’re the one who can do magic,” Gert pointed out.

Nico narrowed her eyes. “You know that’s not how it works. My parents knew some weird magic, yeah. But I

haven't exactly had spare time to study up on the art of witchcraft. The only magic I can do is with the Staff of One."

Karolina knew she was right. With the staff, all Nico needed to do was to speak something with the intent of it being a spell, and her words would do whatever she wanted them to do, provided she'd formulated it right in her head, and as long as she'd never used that particular spell before.

"Beyond that," she went on, "you know as much about magic and the Elder Gods of the Earth as I do."

They fell silent. The DJ switched up the music again, this time to an electronic melody with soaring voices, almost alien. Karolina's joy had been dimmed by Nico's news, and this new song dampened her spirits even further. She might be able to dance, but she feared she would never really feel as if she belonged here. Or anywhere. Howl seemed to welcome everyone, but she wondered how the club kids would react if they knew they had an alien among them.

"You okay?" Gert asked her.

"Yeah," Karolina said. "But we should go. Whatever Chase's 'secret mission' is with Molly—"

"He's going to want to hear this," Nico finished for her.

Karolina led the way, and the three of them threaded a line through the dancing crowd. Once they were outside, Gert would call Chase. He had a surprise for them, apparently, but he'd have to come and get them or at least tell them where he and Molly had gone after they'd all bugged out of the old S.H.I.E.L.D. base.

They got a few looks as they left, mostly strange glances. Karolina figured they were from kids who didn't understand how the three of them fit together. Teenagers seemed to run in packs of guys and girls who tried their best to look alike, but that wasn't the Runaways' MO.

Outside, a blast of cool air hit them. Not cold, but a little chilly for Los Angeles. Karolina shivered as she thought of the fire Sunstroke had at his command. The Runaways had called the police and waited on a roof across the street until

the cops showed up at the Rancho Los Hermanos Hospital. As far as they knew, the firebug was in custody, and that was the best they could do, considering they were essentially fugitives themselves.

Gert took out her cell phone—one of those burners you could get at any convenience store, no service plan, virtually untraceable. If they worked for drug dealers, there was no reason they couldn't also work for full-time runaway orphans and part-time vigilantes. She thumbed the phone and then turned her back on Nico and Karolina. The club's door opened again, and the music raged for a few seconds before it swung shut. Karolina longed for the freedom of the dance floor.

Raised voices off to her left drew her attention. Two girls and a guy stood there.

"I'm totally serious," said one of the girls. Her huge hoop earrings swung as she turned side to side to glare at her companions. "You don't believe me?" The girl held a cell phone in front of her, one of the oversize ones. It had a hot-pink case and the screen was badly cracked. "This is her phone. I swear to God, I heard her talking to somebody on it when she walked by. She went across the street and was, like, leaving or whatever...maybe calling an Uber...then she yelled and I saw them drag a bag over her head and just, like, *hurl* her into the back of a car. Tinted windows, all that stuff."

"Did you get the license plate?" the other girl asked.

"No. I was busy freaking out."

"You've gotta call the cops," said the guy with them, finally speaking up. "Lots of weird crap going on around here. You gotta call them."

The first girl stared at the broken phone in her right hand. "I got my prints all over it. I hope that's okay."

"Just call," said the second girl.

"You two will stay with me?"



The guy shrugged. "Sure. Don't know what help we can be. We didn't see anything till you came running over. But we won't leave you out here by yourself."

Twenty feet away, just outside the club's door, Nico stepped up beside Karolina. "You hearing this?"

"Are these the same people you heard talking about the Pride?"

"Yeah. Well, two of them were out here smoking with the others. But the girl with the phone is new."

Karolina started walking toward them, but Nico halted her. Behind them, Gert sighed heavily as she turned to face them.

"Chase isn't answering," Gert said, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. "I'm sure he and Molly are okay, right? I mean..." Her words trailed off as she noticed something was amiss. "What's going on?"

Nico gestured toward the girl with the shattered phone, who had begun pacing furiously as she used her own phone to call the police. "A girl got abducted right down the street."

"After what you overheard before, it seems like she's far from the first one," Gert said.

Karolina exhaled, trying not to wonder if her parents were alive. "The Pride or not, we've got to do something."

"And we can't wait for the police," Gert said. "If someone's grabbing kids off the street at these clubs and this girl is just the latest..."

"Yeah," Nico said. She strode over to the frantic girl, the other strangers looking on. Karolina and Gert followed but hung back a few paces.

"Hey, can I see that?" Nico asked, gesturing toward the abducted girl's phone.

The two smokers frowned. The frantic girl blinked as if Nico had just apparated out of thin air from Hogwarts, then glanced down at the supposedly broken phone in her hand. "Who are you supposed to be?"

“Someone who wants to help,” Nico said, holding out her hand. “We heard what you were saying just now and I need that phone.”

The guy with them had seemed halfway disinterested a moment ago. Now he stiffened, like his white-knight powers had just kicked in. He stepped between Nico and the frantic girl. “I don’t think so. She’s calling the cops, and that phone is evidence. Nobody’s touching it till the police get here.”

The frantic girl had half-turned from them. She had the missing girl’s phone in one hand and her own cell in the other, thumb-dialing 911. Nico exhaled loudly and glanced at Karolina, who knew what had to happen next.

“Lighting up,” Karolina said.

With a flourish of her hands, she summoned a burst of colorful light so bright that the strangers all cried out and tried to shield their eyes. The glare had blinded them all for a moment, and the aftereffects would linger for half a minute or so.

“Time to go,” Gert said.

Nico was already in motion. Karolina glanced around to make sure nobody else would interfere even as Nico snatched the missing girl’s phone from the hand of the only witness to her abduction. It felt arrogant to Karolina, thinking they could accomplish what the police could not, but more and more they had found that to be reality. When it came to helping kids and teenagers (like themselves) in trouble, the Runaways certainly had a better batting average than the LAPD.

The girl shouted for them to give the phone back, but Karolina and the others were already running. Gert had the shortest legs, but she could put on the speed when she needed to, and by the time they reached the alley beside the dance club she had outpaced both Karolina and Nico. They raced along the alley, darted through the parking lot of an auto body shop, and ran into the next street over. Inside the auto body shop, a guard dog started barking his head

off, but by then Karolina and the girls were turning a corner at the next block.

"We good?" Nico asked.

Karolina and Gert paused and craned their necks to look back the way they'd come, but there was no sign of pursuit.

"Seems okay," Gert said.

"Those guys are still trying to get their vision to clear," Karolina said. "I just wanted to make sure nobody else had decided to follow."

Nico walked past the faded pink facade of the Flamingo, a 1950s diner with a self-consciously art deco style. The interior of the place was dark except for the glow of a neon cheeseburger on the wall. Karolina wished the place was open—the mere thought of french fries made her stomach grumble. But the instant the thought entered her mind, she realized how selfish it was. A girl had been grabbed off the street and her life was likely in danger.

*What the hell's wrong with me?* she thought. But she knew the answer. The Runaways were in crisis so often that it had begun to seem normal. A shudder went through her as she realized just how alarmingly twisted that was. None of this should seem normal.

"Okay, Nico," she said with new urgency. "You've got the phone. Now what?"

"Hold this," Nico replied, handing Gert the phone. She reached into the pocket sewn into her skirt and took out a small folding knife.

Karolina and Gert both winced when Nico reopened the little cut she'd made earlier. As the blood started to flow, the Staff of One emerged from her chest again. No matter how many times Karolina saw it, she'd never get used to the sight of the long staff, with the strange sphere at its head topped with a large ring, surging from within Nico, as if either she was a phantom or the staff was.

Holding the staff, Nico looked at the phone in Gert's hand. In those moments, the young witch always looked

older, confident, and mature. She raised the staff, and when she spoke, her voice had that eerie weight that had become familiar to them all. The words were magic. An incantation. A spell.

*"Find Your Voice,"* Nico said.

The phone lit up. The screen was spiderwebbed with a thousand little cracks, but it lit up immediately. The GPS app illuminated the darkness on the sidewalk in front of the tacky diner. Karolina looked over Gert's shoulder and saw a red dot on a map of the neighborhood. If the phone was the blinking blue dot—and she was sure it must be—then they were only half a mile or so from the location of the phone's owner.

"The red dot is the missing girl?" Gert asked.

Nico stood beside her, the three of them staring at the broken screen. "That's the general idea. Lead the way, Gert. As long as that red dot stays on the screen, she's still alive. Let's find her before it winks out."

With Gert navigating, the three of them hurried across the street, walking quickly at first and then quickening to a run. Half a mile, that was all. Just half a mile, and the red dot still glowed on the screen. But for how long?

"You're brilliant," Karolina said as they ran.

Nico beamed. "I have my days."

Gert handed the hexed phone to Karolina and plucked her own burner from her pocket. "You navigate for a minute," she said as they kept running. "I'm going to try Chase again. Whatever we're rushing into, here, we ought to have backup."

Karolina felt the phone in her hand. Its outer shell was scuffed and cracked, and the screen had shattered so badly that it had little bits missing, but their blue dot kept blinking as they turned a corner, closing in on the red dot. The red dot kept gleaming, the abducted girl still alive. Yet with every step, Karolina felt dread closing around her heart, and

when she glanced at Nico and Gert, she saw the same dread on their faces.

It couldn't be true, could it?

The Pride, back in L.A.? Their parents, alive?

Karolina had never realized hope and fear could feel so much alike.



Chase stood inside a cavernous space, full of stalagmites and rock walls and yet also somehow elegant. Even as the word occurred to him, it seemed both strange and appropriate. In the midst of the cavern there were carved stairways and rows of vidscreens, computers, and other tech. There were statues and tapestries and detailed woodwork only a few feet from strange vehicles and deactivated service robots. He'd landed the *Leapfrog* on a raised stone table he'd immediately christened "the lilypad" in his mind, which seemed to have been made specifically for such a vehicle to land or dock. Now he walked up a wide set of steps, just half a dozen stairs, and found himself staring at a shadowy gallery lined with portraits of the six families that had made up the Pride, each with its own individual lighting.

*No. Not the families*, he thought. The portraits were of the Pride themselves. The parents only, not their children. His face, the faces of the other Runaways—they were nowhere to be seen.

"This! Is! Awesome!" Molly Hayes cried.

Chase turned and saw her thrust her arms triumphantly in the air. She spun around, taking it all in, and then turned to stare at him, grinning and wide-eyed.

"This is real, right? I mean, we can stay here? You said you found our parents' old hideout, and I know they were bad guys. But we're good guys, Chase, and we need a Super

Hero headquarters, and this place is perfect! More than perfect!”

She paused, frowning thoughtfully. “Wait, there are bedrooms, right? I could have my own room?”

Chase laughed. “I scoped the place out, Mol. I didn’t want to take you guys here until I’d made sure there weren’t any surprises lying around. No monsters or time-traveling dinosaurs to eat our faces—”

A loud, damp huff sounded over by the *Leapfrog*. Chase flinched. Even after all this time, he could not get used to having Old Lace with them, and even if he could make himself comfortable around a genetically engineered nine-foot dinosaur, it would’ve been harder without Gert around. Her parents had brought Old Lace from the future as a gift and the dinosaur shared a psychic bond with her. When they’d all first gotten together, Gert had been set on them all having Super Hero—style code names—and in a particularly antagonistic state of mind, she’d chosen Arsenic for herself. Poison. So when they’d found the dinosaur, she’d fallen back on the title of some old movie, *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

None of them used the Super Hero code names anymore. There’d been too much ugliness and death, too much fear, and if they’d ever felt like heroes, they certainly didn’t anymore. But for the dino, Old Lace had stuck.

“Sorry, girl,” Chase said. “No offense.”

Old Lace sniffed the air, glared sideways at him, and then started prowling the cavern, investigating with her nose the way a dog might. To Gert, she had become the equivalent of a faithful house pet, and Molly seemed to feel the same way, but Chase decided he would keep better track of her location until the team was reunited.

“So?” Molly said, one hand on her hip, green eyes shining. “Do I get my own room?”

“Like I was saying—”

"I mean, I could share with Karolina. Or with Gert or Nico. Probably not Gert, though, 'cause she'll have Old Lace in there a lot, or she'll be wanting to hook up with you behind closed doors. Which, let's just say, gross. No offense, but..."

She visibly shuddered.

"Hey—" Chase began.

"I said 'no offense.'"

"Saying 'no offense' doesn't actually stop someone from being offended. It's just giving yourself permission to be offensive."

Molly sighed theatrically and strode over to him. She took his left hand in both of hers and gazed with sympathy into his eyes. "It's not you, Chase. I'm sure you're perfectly fine as boys go. Though you could stand to shower more often and change your socks every day."

"Is this you trying to make me feel better, or..."

She hit him. Gently, considering she could have broken all of his bones. All of them.

"Ow!"

Rolling her eyes, she dropped his hand. "Don't be a baby. I'm just saying that kissing boys is gross. Boys, as in the universe of boys, not just boys named Chase. More importantly, I can have my own room if I want one, but if I wanted to share with someone—"

"I'm sure one of the other girls would be fine with that."

"—because it's a new place, y'know? And underneath the La Brea Tar Pits, which is kind of creepy. And it's big. Full of gadgets and rocks and probably evil experiments from the Pride, and—"

"I get it, Molly," Chase said. He crouched so he could be eye to eye. "You'll be fine. I promise. With our parents gone, we could live down here for a long time. There's plenty of food stored away, totally sweet living quarters, and tech that will make it much easier for us to help the people we want to help."

"Boring." She dropped his hand.

“It’s not boring at all. We can learn way more about what our parents were up to. And—”

“Boring.”

He laughed. “Okay. Just think of it as a way for me to entertain myself in a hideout full of girls.”

Molly frowned. “It’s not easy, is it? Being the only boy?”

Chase straightened up. “Some days it’s great. And Gert usually makes it great. But other times, no, it’s not easy. You guys fight a lot, and mostly about stuff that...well, that doesn’t seem to me to be worth fighting about. If I try to get involved, I get barked at. If I try to stay out of it, everyone thinks I don’t care. So I just kind of keep my head down, hack into the Pride’s computer files—which is how I found us this place—and remind myself I used to daydream about being trapped alone with a bunch of girls.”

Molly had gone very quiet. She glanced at the floor, looking as if she couldn’t decide whether to speak or run.

“Something on your mind?” Chase asked.

“Just us,” she said. “All of us. We were pretty spoiled, I guess.”

Chase grimaced. He’d lived his life as the son of geniuses. His parents had been brilliant inventors, tech-savants, and they’d expected him to be a genius, too. What they’d gotten instead had been a sloppy, sometimes lazy, entirely average teenage boy. They’d never done a good job hiding their disappointment, and usually hadn’t even tried. Chase had always dreaded the annual charity gatherings—well, what they claimed were charity gatherings before he found out about the Pride—thinking that the difference between himself and the other kids was that their parents loved them. He knew differently now. They all did. But still...

“Spoiled?” he said, trying not to be irritated. Molly was still a kid, after all. “How do you figure that?”

“I don’t mean our parents were all, like, fawning over us or anything. Just that none of us had brothers or sisters. I always wanted one. Didn’t matter to me if it was a brother



or a sister. I'd have liked someone around who went through the same things I went through. Someone to share it with. My parents always said I was lucky to be an only child, 'cause only children got spoiled. They got all the attention, and more toys, and more everything. And I guess that was true. At least kinda true."

Chase didn't smile. He didn't try to make her sadness go away. "But you never felt spoiled."

Molly shook her head. "I bet you didn't, either."

"You'd win that bet."

"Things are a little crazy now," said Molly, the mistress of understatement. "But at least now I've got people around who are going through the things I'm going through. Like brothers and sisters. People to share it with."

Chase pulled her into an impromptu hug. Molly endured it for a few seconds, even squeezed him back. Then she giggled and said, "Careful I don't crush you."

He tugged her hat—a funny animal hat with the tassels that she loved, just one from her collection—down to cover her eyes. Blindly, Molly reached out and gave him a little shove that knocked him on his butt. Chase laughed, and Molly acted all faux-angry as she pulled her hat up, but it was a nice moment. The kind of moment they never got enough of anymore, though if Chase were being honest with himself, he'd never had many of them before.

"I surrender," he said, putting his hands up. "I won't do it again."

"Liar," Molly retorted. But she smiled, and Chase understood. Maybe he didn't like being the only guy in the group, but if he had to be, at least he got to be a kinda sorta big brother to a girl who'd really wanted one.

"Can I ask you something?"

Molly made a face. "You just did."

"It's a pretty simple question, but a hard one, too," Chase said. "We're all older than you. I think that makes it easier to adjust to all the crap we've been through, all the

bad stuff. You seem pretty strong, Molly. Amazingly strong, and I don't mean your mutant powers. You're always trying to be positive, to keep us pushing forward. But here's my question. Are you okay?"

With zero hesitation, the girl scowled. "Of course not. What a stupid question."

Chase blinked, amused and insulted in equal measure. "Okay."

"I'm eleven. I remember being a *little* kid. Like, really little, when you got hugs from your mom and dad or like when you had a fever and your mom climbed into bed with you or like when dad made Mickey Mouse pancakes on Sunday mornings. I'm not little anymore, obviously, but I remember that stuff."

She crossed her arms, and for a moment she didn't look like a big kid at all. "I really wish I didn't. Remembering that stuff sucks." Molly's eyes darkened and she lifted her chin defiantly. "But at least I'm strong enough to pound anyone who gives me trouble."

"I'm sure that helps," Chase allowed.

"Why did you ask me if I was okay? It's a really dumb question, Chase. None of us are okay."

"Well...Gert and I were talking."

Molly held up a hand. "Oh, no! I know what this is about! Do not even think about it, mister."

Prowling around the cavern, sniffing stalagmites, Old Lace looked up at the brusque tone in Molly's voice and growled in concern.

"So Gert already told you—"

"Yes! She's a traitor, and so are you. We're all supposed to be in this together."

"I'm eighteen," Chase reminded her. "The other girls aren't far behind. But you're only—"

"I know how old I am, Chase."

"We just think it'd be nice for you to have something normal in your life."

Molly glared at him. She pointed a finger in his direction and jabbed the air, as if to remind him that she might be ninety-seven pounds and an inch shy of five feet, but she could smash his ribs with one finger.

"You listen to me, Chase Stein," Molly declared. "I don't care what you and Gert think. I am not going to *school*."

He wanted to keep going, to explain that she needed to study math and grammar at least, but Molly turned her back and walked over to Old Lace, as if she felt like the dinosaur must be on her side.

As Chase debated continuing the conversation, his cell phone began to buzz in his pocket. When he answered, he couldn't get out more than a word or two in the midst of the rapid-fire string of information coming from Gert on the other end of the line.

"On my way," he said, when she seemed to have finished.

The line went dead. Chase stared at the phone in his hand for a second, and then he hurried toward the *Leapfrog*.

"Molly! Grab Old Lace and climb aboard."

"Where are we going?" she sulkily demanded.

Chase didn't look back. "I think the girls have found you someone to punch."



FOUR

If Gert hadn't been holding the broken phone and staring at the red dot on its screen, she'd never have given the hidden door a second look. It had a metal accordion grate across the front and a thick padlock on a chain. A generation of graffiti and grit coated both grate and door. Stuck between two buildings—one an apartment complex and the other a 1940s department store that had been gentrified into a trendy gym—the door seemed to exist almost by itself. It was slightly recessed. Not hidden, exactly, but that was how Gert immediately thought of it. For a gleaming, modern city, Los Angeles had plenty of forgotten corners and hidden doors.

"You're sure about this?" Gert asked.

Nico and Karolina both glanced around. An old man had passed them a block east, walking his dog, but as they spotted him again he turned a corner. Half a block to the west was a fenced-in vacant lot with a faded sign promising an office tower that seemed unlikely to come to fruition. A homeless man in filthy layers of clothing pushed a shopping

cart past that empty lot. He seemed to be talking to himself, or maybe singing, if the melodic sway of his words was any evidence.

"This is the spot," Nico said. "Unless there's some other magic screwing up my spell, that GPS is accurate. The girl's behind that door somewhere."

Gert glanced around again. "Okay. I guess it's as clear as it's going to get."

Karolina removed her bracelet and ignited her finger with colorful lights, almost pastel-soft.

Nico might have been their de facto leader—although Gert sometimes wondered why—but Karolina didn't need anyone to give the order. She shot a pulse of light from her left hand and laser-cut the chain, which clanked to the sidewalk. The smell of hot metal filled the air as Gert grabbed the grate and tried to slide it aside. Rust had built up over the years and frozen it in place, but then Nico gave her a hand and they managed to drag it open.

"However they got the girl in here," Karolina said, "it wasn't this way."

The door behind the grate proved less of a challenge. They'd agreed to be quiet, to avoid warning the girl's abductors that they were coming, but when Nico grabbed the doorknob and gave it a firm twist, the long-since-rotted frame crumbled around the lock. A small cloud of dust puffed up, and then they were inside.

Gert glanced around again. There were cars coming from either direction, headlights dim but getting brighter. They seemed to have managed to be fairly stealthy.

"Let's go," Nico whispered. There in the shadows, her slim body clad in silk, lace, and cotton—but all in black—she seemed to have been born to the darkness.

*Confidence*, Gert thought. That was why Nico was the leader. She'd see the thing that needed to be done, and she'd do it, every time.

They slipped inside and Gert pulled the door shut behind them. With its broken lock and crumbled frame, it didn't close all the way. It would've been better to close the grate, to cut down on the chance that someone passing by would notice, but Gert had left the grate open in case they had to make a quick retreat.

Nico put a finger to her lips, reminding them to be quiet from this point forward—they didn't know who might be down here, so stealth was their best friend. Colorful ribbons of light swirled hypnotically around her hand as she led the way down the darkened corridor. The room they were in had been a kind of foyer, once upon a time, but it wasn't until they had followed a set of marble steps down two narrow flights and through a metal turnstile that Gert realized where they were.

"The subway," she whispered, earning a frown from Nico for breaking the silence.

Karolina moved closer to her. "There's no subway station here."

"Not anymore, there isn't," Gert replied.

Nico shot them both a withering glance and Gert nodded. She'd been quiet the entire way down. Instead of talking, she focused on the walls and the stairs, on the old signs tiled onto the walls. Whatever entrance this might be, she felt sure they had found their way into what remained of the old Hollywood Subway. During her freshman year, she'd done a research project on public transportation in L.A., a topic that bored her numb until she'd stumbled on information about the city's abandoned subway stations, these relics of an earlier age—a golden age, many thought. The Pacific Electric Railway Interurban line had been built in the 1920s. Most of her research had vanished from her brain, but she remembered that much. Abandoned places had always appealed to her, and the idea that some of these stations had been sealed up just as they were, like

dusty time capsules of a bygone era, had a romanticism that appealed to her.

They descended further, following a wrought-iron spiral staircase that led to a metal gate. Rust had ruined it, and the gate hung open slightly, no barrier at all. Beyond it was the platform. Thin shafts of light came down from far overhead, metal plates in the street or vents behind buildings, just enough so that even without Karolina's colorful illumination it wouldn't have been pitch-black down there.

Gert looked at the phone. The blinking blue dot that represented them had come to rest right on top of the red dot. Confused, she set out across the platform, glancing both ways but seeing no sign of anyone. The place seemed to exhale as she moved through it, like the breath of a newly unsealed tomb.

*Shut up, Gertrude,* she thought. *Too many old monster movies for you.*

Her brain wanted to leap from thoughts of monster movies to thoughts of needing to curl up with Chase to *watch* those movies someday, but she pushed the distraction away. The tunnel to her left went on about fifty yards before it struck a wall. On the right the tunnel went a bit deeper before hitting a matching barrier. Whatever remained of this station, it was just a sliver of what it once had been. At the edge of the platform, she looked down and saw that the track was still there. But no train would be arriving here. Not ever.

Nico and Karolina had hung back, poking around in search of any clues. Gert realized she'd left the safe, comforting circle of Karolina's illumination, and she started back toward them.

The missing girl's phone buzzed in her hand, and she stopped short and stared at the shattered screen. The blue dot had stopped blinking. It still covered up most of the red dot, but they were both solid now, one on top of the other.

*I don't get it*, she thought. Nico wanted them to be quiet, but there was nobody here.

"This makes no sense," Gert whispered, walking toward Nico and Karolina. The moment she took a step, the phone buzzed in her hand again and the blue dot began to blink anew.

Gert took a step backward and the blinking stopped. Her eyes went wide. She held the phone to one side and stared at the concrete between her feet, then hurried to rejoin Karolina and Nico, ignoring the way the phone buzzed in her hand again.

"What?" Karolina whispered, seeing the look on her face. "What are you—?"

Nico shushed her, but Gert ignored them both. She studied the gate through which they'd entered, and then she saw the shadowy recession off to the right, toward the wall where the platform ended. She strode to that recessed area of the wall, knowing before she reached it that her hunch had proven correct. More stairs. They'd found the station, but there was at least one level below this one. A chain had been hung across the stairs with a metal sign reading warning: do not enter, but Gert stepped over it, careful to hold the handrail, and then she was moving downward. A new urgency filled her as she thought of that red dot on the phone.

Karolina kept her light dim as she followed. Nico seemed to be trying to get Gert's attention, maybe to tell her to slow down, but as they rounded a second turn in the stairs, there was no way Gert was going to listen. If anything, she wanted to move faster, but their shoes were already making a soft scuff and so she didn't risk it.

On the next landing she slowed, listening to the darkness as it breathed, almost as if this space was adjusting to people after so long without them.

A hand touched her shoulder. Gert jumped, hissing between her teeth to avoid cursing loudly. She spun around



to see Nico tapping at her ear and cocking her head, silently instructing Gert to listen. The three of them froze on the stairs, and after a moment Gert realized that she could hear voices chanting not far below. Not only could she hear them, but she thought she had actually been hearing them for a while without recognizing the sound.

Chanting voices were always a bad sign.

At the bottom of the stairs they found a very narrow corridor that ended in a metal door that had rusted halfway open. Gert had a little trouble squeezing through, but they all managed it, only to find themselves in another tiled corridor.

What they'd found were not the stairs most passengers would have used, but some kind of maintenance access. Following the corridor, they emerged in a dark corner of another platform, and here the tunnel and the tracks were not blocked at either end. The subway no longer ran, but they were deep enough that nobody had bothered to close up the tunnel. There would be a million rats down here, she was sure, but nothing scurried toward them. Not that Gert was worried about rats at the moment.

Karolina had snuffed her own light. The illumination down here came from lights that had been set up on the platform across the tracks. The gap between the two sides of the station remained dark, for the light could not fully reach the tracks, but half a dozen lights had been erected on the other side. Gert had lived her life in Los Angeles and had seen her share of movie sets where the crew would cluster around weirdly lit spaces and watch actors walk and talk and fight. For a few seconds, she felt certain they had walked in on a movie set, so familiar were those lighting setups.

But the chanting rose in volume and she heard the girl cry out, and she knew this was no movie. Nine people had gathered in a circle around a red-haired teenage girl who'd been handcuffed against a pillar on the platform. Gagged, the girl kept whipping her head around and staring

imploringly at the figures surrounding her, all of whom wore wine-red cloaks.

Gert's horror and anger remained, but she packed them away in that place in her mind where all hesitation had to go, so that she could act. Old Lace wasn't here. Chase wasn't here. Molly wouldn't be punching anyone. It was just her and Karolina and Nico, and Gert herself had no powers except for her psychic bond to her pet. But she wasn't about to let this girl die.

One of the hooded figures stepped toward the pillar, brandishing a knife. A second moved toward the girl and for the first time, Gert noticed the glinting metal object in his hands, some kind of mechanism.

Her breath caught in her throat, because that mechanism looked familiar.

A third hooded figure stepped forward and the chanting died down. The woman—for her voice identified her as female—began some kind of enchantment, and to Gert's horror, she recognized this, too.

*"Antin krek varin,"* it began. *"Vriik hr nisanti. Nisanti hr kariin."*

The man holding the tech turned it on and it began to hum. "It better work this time."

"The Rite of Blood works every time," said the one with the knife. "It's the Rite of Thunder we need to perfect. But if it doesn't work tonight, there are always other street kids."

Nico grabbed Gert's arm. She spun to see the shock in her friends' eyes and knew it reflected her own.

The Rite of Blood. The Rite of Thunder. That incantation, and that machine. None of these people were her parents, Gert was pretty sure of that, but this ritual and everything that went along with it...she had seen it before, only with less chanting. She'd seen it in Alex Wilder's house, on the night they learned their parents were Super Villains...the night they learned their parents were murderers.

Whoever these people were, they wanted to be the Pride.

*Posers*, Gert thought. *Typical L.A. Why be original when you can recycle an old brand?*

Gert closed her eyes tightly. She wished Chase were with them. Wished Molly could have been there to hit somebody. More than anything, she wished she had Old Lace, because being away from the dinosaur for too long created a weird, irritating buzz at the base of her skull. She wanted them all together, but at least Nico and Karolina were with her.

She opened her eyes. Nico held up a hand, military-style. The moment she closed it into a fist, they would attack—though it would be mostly Nico and Karolina doing the attacking. It would have taken long, dangerous seconds for Gert to get down onto the tracks and climb up on the other side, so Karolina would probably carry them both—she couldn't carry them far, but across that twenty-foot gap? No problem.

Nico had the Staff of One in her free hand. She'd made herself bleed again, and Gert knew it was not the only blood that would be shed tonight.

On the other side of the tracks, on that far platform, the man with the knife moved in and the handcuffed girl began to scream and twist, trying to slide around to the other side of the pillar, as if that would keep her safe.

Nico closed her hand. Karolina transformed, her whole body igniting with that sweeping palette of color. Gert started to run toward the edge, toward the gap between platforms.

With a concussive *whoomp* of displaced air that knocked her back two steps, four people appeared out of nowhere on the other side, amid the Pride wannabes, disrupting their ritual.

"What the hell?" Gert whispered.

Karolina went dark. Nico opened her hand, held out an arm, and directed them to fall back a few more steps, urgency in her brown eyes. Whatever was happening over there on the other platform, it wasn't something the people

conducting the ritual had planned. Someone screamed. One of the four new arrivals transformed into an enormous tiger, leaped on a hooded woman, and knocked over one of the lighting arrays, which shattered loudly.

*Shape-shifter*, Gert thought.

“Who are they?” Nico rasped in her ear. “Do you recognize them?”

The simple answer was no. She saw a tall Asian woman with ragged-cut hair raise her hands and cause a gust of wind that blew two hooded Pride members across the platform and into the darkness of the gap. A bespectacled Latino man drew a sword from a scabbard at his belt, stabbed a robed woman in the shoulder, and then vanished with an audible pop before *whooping* back into reality a dozen feet away, right behind the captive girl. He raised that anything-but-ordinary sword, but two of the hooded figures tackled him, one of them raising a dagger. Before the dagger could fall, the man in the round little glasses teleported again, reappearing with his sword in the midst of the melee. Gert wondered if he had been going to kill the abducted girl, or if he’d meant to save her.

She wondered because whoever these people were, they weren’t Super Heroes. They all looked middle-aged, and if they were Super Heroes, Gert would certainly have heard of them by now. Even if they were obscure, they’d be in the files Chase had compiled. He had Rocket Racer in there, and heroes didn’t get much more obscure than that. So who the heck were these people?

“We’ve got to go,” she said, the epiphany striking her hard. She spun to the others, thinking she would have to persuade them.

“Agreed,” Nico said. “But not without her. Whoever these people are, the girl’s safer with us.”

“Do it,” Gert replied. “Kay and I will cover you.”

Nico nodded. She raised the Staff of One and said “*Special Delivery*,” in that creepy voice they all knew very

well by now. In the midst of the fight on that lighted platform, the girl's handcuffs fell away as if they'd been unlocked simultaneously. Before they could even drop to the ground, a swirl of white mist wrapped around her like a cocoon and lifted her, swiftly carried her across the gap, and deposited her beside Nico.

Stunned, the girl seemed caught between wanting to shout and wanting to collapse. Karolina took her by the hand. "Come with us if you want to live."

The girl's mouth opened. She took a quick glance over her shoulder at the violence still unfolding, and then she looked at Karolina and laughed.

"Really?" she said. "*Terminator* quotes? That's the best you can do?"

Nico took the girl by the elbow. "How about we run?"

"Running's good!" the girl replied.

Then all four of them were rushing back along the corridor, squeezing through that rust-frozen door, and hustling up long flights of steps toward the surface. Gert handed the girl her hexed and shattered phone and tugged out her own, trying to call Chase.

"No service, no service, no service," she said, almost a chant of its own.

"We need him. We need the *Leapfrog*," Nico said.

"She knows," Karolina chided.

"What is a *Leapfrog*?" the rescued girl asked.

The second they emerged onto the upper level's train platform, Gert's phone vibrated with a string of text messages that hadn't reached her underground, all of them from Chase worriedly asking if she was all right.

"Two bars!" Gert announced triumphantly.

She called Chase. He answered before it could even ring and she started shouting the address at him. Gert had texted him updates while they'd been following the hexed phone's GPS, so he was close.

Voices shouted up from below. Hooded Pride wannabes or weird super-powered teleporting bastards? They couldn't be sure, but either way they were being pursued.

"Make it quick!" she shouted to Chase on the phone.

Then they were rushing up the last flight of stairs. Gert stuffed her phone back into her pocket and turned to the girl they'd saved. "What's your name?"

"Allis," she said, red hair covering half her face. Her eyes were wide with shock and she stumbled a little. Karolina caught her by the arm and helped her keep climbing the stairs.

"I'm Allis," she repeated.

"You're safe, Allis," Karolina said. "I've got you."

Something passed between them, almost like they'd met before. Gert also studied Allis for a moment and thought she did seem sort of familiar, but in a good way, like maybe they'd gone to kindergarten together or something. Gert didn't have time to sort it out, because by then Nico had reached the top.

"Go, go!" Nico said, holding the door for them.

They raced into the street, shouts still coming up from below. Karolina and Nico dragged the rusty accordion gate back across the doorway and Karolina started using her powers to fuse it shut. Gert whipped her head back and forth, but saw no sign of the *Leapfrog*.

"Chase!" she shouted to the night sky.

As if in reply, the *Frog* appeared, bounding over the fence from the empty lot across the street. The hatch hissed open even before it landed, and as the *Leapfrog* settled to the street, Gert ran for it. Molly leaped from the open hatch, fists up like an old-time boxer, ready for a fight. With the shouts from behind her, Gert realized she might get it.

"Who do I hit?" Molly asked as Gert reached her.

"Sit tight, kiddo. You might get your chance."

They stood together, watching the subway entrance as Karolina helped Allis onto the *Frog*, with Nico bringing up the

rear. Disappointed, Molly lingered another moment until Gert scooted her inside. A hooded figure smashed against the inside of the rusty subway gate, but as Gert watched, the guy in the hood began to scream as he was enveloped by a growing sheath of ice.

*That's it, she thought. I'm out.*

But as she turned to jump on board, she saw another figure hurrying toward the *Leapfrog* from a graffitied bus shelter half a block away. Dark hair, ragged on one side but shaved on the other, the guy looked maybe sixteen or seventeen, but it was hard to tell the way he was staggering, and with his face swollen and bloody. He had one hand on his abdomen and with the other he reached out.

"Please!" he called. "Don't go!"

From inside the *Frog*, Gert's friends were shouting at her. Time to go. They didn't know what they might be up against fifteen seconds from now and didn't want to find out. But the bleeding kid tried to break into a run and instead he went sprawling onto the street. Gert dashed to him.

She knelt by him, took his arm, helped him up.

"We've got to go," she said.

He glanced up at her. His eyes looked purple in the dark, and they were pleading with her.

"Don't leave me. Please. You've gotta help..."

He started to pass out. Gert panicked, propped him up, and started to drag him. She shouted for Nico, but before she could even get the name out, she felt the burden lifted from her.

"Get his feet," Molly said, taking the stranger under the arms.

She looked ridiculous, this eleven-year-old somehow toting a much bigger guy across the pavement toward the open hatch of the *Leapfrog*. Gert grabbed the boy's ankles and together they hustled him to the *Frog* and hoisted him inside. Someone shouted from behind them and she looked

back to see a face behind the rusty subway gate. Ice had covered most of it, and now the ice shattered and the gate began to screech as it was dragged back.

"Move it, Gert!" Nico snapped, grabbing her wrist and yanking her inside.

The hatch closed. Gert hadn't even taken a seat when Chase put the *Frog* in gear, and then they were leaping away. She fell into her seat, struggled with the belt, and when she finally looked up, everyone but Chase was staring at the bloody boy sprawled unconscious on the floor at their feet. Instead of just rescuing Allis from ritual murder, they'd picked up a spare, but Gert knew none of them would argue. This was what they did, saving kids who were in danger, getting them off the streets.

"Great," Nico said. "Now what are we supposed to do?"

"Oh, that's easy," Chase said happily. "We're going home."

"Home?" Karolina asked.

Molly crossed her arms, a satisfied expression on her face. "Chase and I have a surprise for you."

Gert perked up. She glanced toward the cockpit, where Chase focused on piloting the *Frog*. Whatever this surprise was, he hadn't shared it with her, and she was supposed to be his girlfriend.

*That's the point of surprises*, she reminded herself.

Yet somehow it still bothered her. Gert didn't like people in general very much, mostly because people kept secrets. She preferred animals—they had nothing to hide. People, though...people have their secrets. She glanced around at her friends and wondered if any of them were as untrusting of surprises as she was.

Secrets, after all, had gotten them all into their current situation.

Secrets had ruined their lives.

Gert didn't like surprises at all.





FIVE

**K**arolina usually preferred to fly under her own power. The *Leapfrog* made her nervous. She didn't like being cooped up inside the machine, and it always seemed a bit uncanny to her that the ride could be so smooth when you were on board the vehicle, and yet from outside it looked so ungainly as it hopped and glided over the city.

"This is..." Allis whispered, staring around at them all in amazement. "I mean, thank you, of course. Oh my gosh, if you hadn't shown up when you did, those freaks were going to kill me. They were actually going to kill me, weren't they?"

Nico leaned back in her seat. "Yes, we think they were." The Staff of One had vanished again, reabsorbed into her body, although Karolina hadn't seen it happen.

Allis put a hand over her mouth like she might puke, but after a moment she took a deep breath and just nodded.

"You guys saved my life," she said in airy wonder. She tucked a lock of straight, shoulder-length red hair behind her ear. "If not for you all..." Allis shuddered. "Who are you,

anyway? What were you doing there? I'm Allis....Did I say that already?"

Karolina smiled gently at her. "You did. And you're safe, Allis."

"What's your name?" Allis asked.

Nico shifted forward. "Maybe we should hold off on that for the moment—"

"Karolina. My name is Karolina."

Allis smiled. "It's nice to meet you." She glanced around the ship. "All of you."

Nico rolled her eyes, then pointed at the boy Gert and Molly had hauled aboard. "What about this kid, Allis? Have you seen him before? Maybe he was abducted too and got away?"

Allis frowned. "I think I'd remember that hair."

"I guess we'll find out who he is when he wakes up," Gert said.

They all fell silent for a few moments. Karolina stole several glances at Allis, worried the girl might be in shock. Allis had blood on her wrists where the cuffs had chafed, and for the first time Karolina noticed the bruising around her left eye and some blood in her hair.

"Are you okay?" she asked, gesturing toward that blood. "Your head?"

Allis touched the spot and winced. "Just a bump, I think. I don't think I need stitches or anything. But I might have a concussion."

Nico studied her. "Is there somewhere we should take you? There's no reason you have to come with us. We could drop you home...or with the police, to make a report, although you can't say anything about us."

"We'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything," Gert corrected, her green eyes narrowed.

Allis hugged herself. "You guys saved me. If it's gonna get you in trouble, I won't say a word. Anyway, I have zero

interest in seeing the police. They'd only try to make me go home, and I can't do that."

She hesitated, glancing around. "I *won't* do that. You can judge me all you want—"

"Judge you?" Chase said from the front. "Trust me, you're not going to get any judgment from this group."

Karolina smiled. "You're a runaway?"

Allis seemed ashamed, but she nodded.

Karolina took her hand. "You're safe with us."

"I hate to break up the affirmations back there," Chase said, "but without being rude, can one of you blindfold Allis while we're arriving?" He glanced over his shoulder at the newcomer. "'Secret headquarters' and all."

Super serious, Allis nodded. "Of course."

Nobody had anything to blindfold her with, so after a few seconds Molly took off her hat and handed it over. Allis pulled it on and drew it low over her eyes. It looked ridiculous but it did the trick, and they all sat there as the *Leapfrog* made a final jump. It swayed a bit when the thrusters kicked in, letting them descend slowly instead of just dropping.

Molly was peering out a window. "See the giant elephant? How cool is that?"

Chase clicked his tongue. "Molly, hush with the spoilers. Secret headquarters, remember?"

Karolina unlatched her seat belt and moved over beside Molly, stretching out her long legs. The *Leapfrog* would be running in stealth mode, pretty much invisible from the outside, but that didn't prevent them from looking out from within. Karolina blinked in surprise as they descended past the fake mastodons outside the La Brea Tar Pits museum, and then she gasped in surprise as they dropped down through the tar itself.

"Chase, what are you *doing*?" Gert asked.

He didn't reply, but a moment later they'd somehow emerged from the black morass and were inside a huge

cavern. As the *Leapfrog* landed, lights began to blink on throughout the cavern and computer screens winked on. Elegant tapestries hung on the cavern walls and there were arched doorways leading out of this main chamber, like something out of a medieval castle—if it weren't for the stalagmites jutting up from the ground at the edges of the room. It had been turned into someone's hideout, but this was nothing like the S.H.I.E.L.D./Hydra secret base they'd had to flee earlier in the day. This was something beautiful and mysterious.

"Holy crap," Nico muttered, looking out the opposite window. "This is some James Bond villain's secret lair, right?"

"Not exactly," Chase replied, as the *Leapfrog's* hydraulics hissed and the vehicle settled on its legs.

On the floor of the *Frog*, the unconscious, bloody boy groaned and began to stir, but did not wake.

Allis took off Molly's hat and handed it back to her. "Wait a second. Are you guys squatting in a Super Villain's lair? That's nuts!"

"It's ours now," Molly said, tugging her hat back on.

"Come on, Bruiser," Gert said to the younger girl, "you can do better than that. What is this place?"

Karolina barely heard the question. Her eyes had locked onto a raised area, tucked away in a recession off to the right of their landing pad. Lights had flickered on as if in welcome and now she saw there were paintings there, a kind of intimate portrait gallery—and even from here she could make out one of the portraits, and knew who must be featured in the others.

"Mom," she whispered.

The *Leapfrog's* hatch popped open and Karolina was the first to jump out. Allis and the unconscious kid were forgotten as she rushed across the cavern. There were no streaks of color around her, no pastels painting the air. This was just Karolina, a girl who'd once loved her parents and

then learned they'd been horrible people all along. A girl who'd once *felt* loved by her parents and then learned they'd only ever cared about fame and youth and only wanted her for her publicity value. But she couldn't forget the way they'd made her feel in the days before she'd learned the truth, in the years when she'd believed she'd had the perfect family.

She slowed as she went up the steps toward that little portrait gallery. She forced herself to scan the other paintings, to look at the portraits of the Wilders and the Steins, the Hayeses and the Minorus, the Yorkes...Yorkeses? Whatever Gert's parents would've been called. Finally she let herself stand in front of the painting of the Deans, her mother and father, and she felt herself begin to shake. Tears sprang to her eyes and she wiped them away, furious with herself for crying over them and furious with them for making her cry. They weren't worth it.

But her childhood? The beautiful thing her life had been in the time before the truth?

That was worth crying over.

"Hey," Nico said softly.

Karolina turned. Nico ought to have been investigating, checking out the lair and its computer files and even the space they had available to them here. Or she should have been studying the portrait of her parents, because for all her goth glory and black candle burning and teen brooding, she'd loved them. Instead, she took Karolina's hands in her own.

"You okay?" Nico asked.

"Are you kidding?" Karolina replied, pushing a veil of blond hair away from her eyes.

Nico blinked, and then laughed. Karolina laughed with her, because what else were they supposed to do? Shaking her head in disbelief that anyone's life could be so completely insane, Karolina hugged her. Nico had that tough exterior, but she hugged back.

“At least we’ve got a place to stay,” Nico said. “And enough room that we won’t end up killing each other.”

“Hey!”

They both turned to see Molly standing in the center of the cavern, just a few feet in front of the raised platform where the *Leapfrog* had landed. She had her hands on her hips as if she were their mom and they’d just tracked mud through the house.

“What’s the matter with you guys?” Molly asked. She threw up her hands, then turned and gestured theatrically toward Chase and Gert, who were hugging blissfully a few feet away. “You should be, like, jumping for joy or something. Or at least giving Chase a round of applause. We’ve hidden out in sewer-stinking warehouses and a movie theater full of rats and the basement of that apartment building the night before they tore it down, and then the S.H.I.E.L.D. base that we had to run from just today, and here’s Chase, and he found us a secret lair that belonged to *our parents*—”

“I’m confused,” Karolina interrupted. “Our parents only had that underwater lair that blew up—”

“Shut it!” Molly snapped, holding up a hand. “I’m talking now. Chase found this place and it’s ours. Like, really ours, because it belonged to our parents and they’re all dead, so it’s ours. Someplace that can be home. And I know it’s weird and sad and everything, but still! How about some whooping and celebrating and hugs for Chase?”

Karolina and Nico looked at one another, then around at the bizarre secret headquarters. The girl, Allis, stepped out of the *Leapfrog* with the mystified expression of someone who knew she didn’t belong, and her eyes went wide as Karolina and Nico threw their arms in the air and began to whoop and celebrate as Molly had demanded. Laughing, Karolina raced down the steps and across to Molly, scooping the smaller girl up in her arms and swinging her in dizzying circles.

Nico crashed into Chase and Gert, hugging them both with an air of general silliness that caused Gert to shove her away, lip curled in feigned revulsion. Nico only laughed and hugged Chase, then kissed him on the cheek, which caused him to blush and glance stupidly around as if he'd just woken from a dream.

"I'll do the kissing, if you don't mind," Gert said, adjusting her glasses with an irritated-librarian look.

Karolina laughed, threw her arms up and used her powers to cast glittering rainbow sparks in the air, all of them bursting like mini-fireworks. Then she ran to Chase and imitated Nico, kissing him on the cheek.

"Really," she said, quietly serious in his ear. "Thank you. It's a huge relief."

Gert stood beside them, arching an eyebrow. "Kay."

Karolina rolled her eyes at her friend's jealousy, then ducked her head in and kissed Gert on the cheek as well. "You heard Molly. Hugs and celebration."

Gert grinned and slid an arm around Chase. "You did good, boy."

Chase nodded. "You don't like surprises, but—"

"I like this one," Gert said.

A low snarl made them all pause and turn toward the noise. For half a second Karolina feared they had celebrated too soon, that there were some kind of guard dogs or—knowing the Pride—guard monsters down here, but it was just Old Lace prancing out of one of the side corridors, snout in the air as she investigated all the hoopla they were making.

Gert called the dinosaur's name and ran to her, threw her arms around her, apparently happier to see her pet than she was to have a new home.

Karolina, Nico, Molly, and Chase stood and watched the girl-and-dinosaur reunion. Ever since she'd been bonded to Old Lace, Gert—or Arsenic—never seemed completely at ease when they were apart. And if she'd been a bit

standoffish before, Gert seemed to like people less and less the more time she spent with her dinosaur. She liked Chase, obviously, and most days she seemed to like the other Runaways, but Karolina got the impression her brilliant purple-haired friend would have preferred her world to be Arsenic and Old Lace 90 percent of the time, with Chase in the mix the other 10 percent, and no room at all for anyone else.

Karolina envied her a little. She wished she had someone—even a genetically engineered dinosaur—that she could feel that comfortable with.

“Umm, I don’t want to interrupt...whatever this is,” Allis said, standing beside the open *Leapfrog* hatch. She pushed her hair behind her ears, then crooked a thumb toward the vehicle’s interior. “But the dead kid?”

Karolina felt a pang of guilt. Here was this poor girl who’d been knocked out, terrified out of her wits, nearly murdered, cuffed to a post, had her wrists chafed till they bled, and been rescued by a bunch of people with super powers, and they were ignoring her.

“Yeah?” Nico said. “What about him?”

Allis shrugged.

“Pretty sure he’s waking up.”



Turned out his name was Zeke. Chase didn’t like him from the second he stepped out of the *Leapfrog*, but the same couldn’t be said for the girls. Not that they were all mooning over the guy or anything, but he was pitiful and injured and good-looking. Chase had seen pretty much every movie Hong Kong action star Chow Yun-Fat had ever made and in every one of them Chow ended up beaten and bloody, clutching his cracked ribs, staggering into or out of some violent altercation. Usually with a gun in each hand, but of



course this Zeke guy didn't have even one gun. That was who Zeke reminded him of, standing there all dignified and broken—Chow Yun-Fat, who was not an especially handsome guy when the movies began, but was inevitably made more attractive with each new injury. It shouldn't have worked like that. He got his ass kicked, got dirty and sweaty, could barely stay on his feet, and yet somehow that made him sexy.

His first word was "Wow." Just that. He glanced around the hideout, looking massively impressed, as if they'd not only passed inspection but exceeded expectations, and said "Wow."

Chase felt the hairs bristle on the back of his neck as he went into defensive mode. He moved in front of Gert—and she shoved him aside, frowning at him like he'd just ripped a huge burp in a public place. He felt stupid after that, because of course her scowl had been well-earned. She didn't need macho jealous boyfriend bullshit in her life. Chase took another look at the bruised-up kid.

"So, you guys are staring," the new arrival said, leaning tiredly against the *Frog*. "My name is Zeke." He pointed at Chase. "I'm gonna guess blue eyes here is Chase Stein, since he's the only dude."

Chase blinked. "How did you know—?"

"I'm Zeke Zheng," the guy said, and then he pointed at each of them in turn. "Molly. Nico. Karolina. Which means the cute chick with the purple hair is Gert."

*Cute chick?* Chase thought, narrowing his eyes.

"Cute chick?" Gert said, narrowing *her* eyes.

Nico moved toward him, hands curled into fists.

Zeke pointed at Allis. "You, I don't know. But if you're with these kids—"

"We just met her," Nico said. "And we just met you. So how the hell do you know our names?"

*Stupid*, Chase thought. *We were stupid to bring this guy back with us.*

Zeke grunted as he forced himself to stand without the support of the *Leapfrog*. “You’re the Pride’s kids. I wanted to find you...tried to sneak away from my mother and her friends, but they caught me. Abernathy—he’s the telekinetic in the group, but he’s got some light telepathy he’s been hiding—anyway, he picked up my thoughts and they tried to stop me. Tried to basically imprison me while my mom tried to convince me this was all normal, that I should just go along and be the next generation of the Nightwatch, take over for them up in San Francisco while they made their play in L.A. Then they found out about the Pride’s minions abducting street kids and sacrificing them and they tracked the minions down and went after them. I had a fight with Abernathy. He smashed me around a lot, but I’m tougher than I look and I knocked the bastard out and took off.”

He grinned then, and the smile lit his face up like he was born for Hollywood.

“I couldn’t believe my luck when I got out onto the street and saw the *Leapfrog* just, like, hovering there. Chase landed...I ran for it...saw you, Karolina...” Zeke shrugged. “I don’t remember much after that. Or anything, really.”

Chase stared at him. They were all staring, even the almost-a-human-sacrifice girl.

“Did I say something wrong?” Zeke asked, looking nervous.

“How about all of it?” Nico said.

Gert crossed her arms, glaring at him. “We have no idea what any of that means.”

“Except the part where your mother’s evil and wanted to brainwash you,” Molly said. “We got that part.”

“And we’ll help,” Karolina said quickly, as if trying to reassure him. She glanced around at the rest of them. “We will help. It’s sort of our thing, taking kids with horrible parents and getting them out of trouble.”

“But there’s obviously a lot more going on here than we understand,” Chase went on. “A lot that you seem to think

we already know, or ought to know. So maybe you better back up and start with, again, who you are.”

“And what the hell is a Nightwatch?” Nico asked.

Zeke nodded slowly. “Okay. Wow.”

“You say ‘wow’ a lot,” Chase noted.

“It’s a ‘wow’ kind of day,” Zeke told him.

Chase had to smile. The guy had charm, as much as he hated to admit it. “Okay, so, the Nightwatch.”

Zeke glanced around. “I’m about to fall down. What are the chances of me finding a chair and something caffeinated in this place?”

They all turned to look at Chase. Of course they did. He was the only one of them who had already seen more of their new home than this one room.

He pointed toward a far door. “This way. Chairs and caffeine. And information about the Nightwatch.”

“Absolutely,” Zeke said. “You have to know everything. Otherwise they’re definitely going to kill us all.”

Nico sighed. “Of course they are.”



Nico had a hundred questions for Chase, but she knew they were going to have to wait. Part of her wished they’d never rescued Allis or been approached by Zeke—that they could erase the whole night—but then they wouldn’t be here in this absurdly weird headquarters under the La Brea Tar Pits. Just thinking about it made her head hurt. The La Brea Tar Pits. One thing was for certain: nobody searching for them would ever think to look here, which was obviously why their parents had chosen this as a location for one of their bases.

“Okay,” she said, settling into a leather chair at a round, gleaming cherrywood table in what could only have been

the Pride's conference room. "I'm going to keep this simple, Zeke, because we don't want your life story."

"You don't have to be rude," Molly said.

Nico shot her a look. In a rudeness contest, Nico wasn't sure if she or Gert would win—she figured it depended on the day—but Molly wasn't usually one to call them out on it. Of course, Zeke did have that dude-in-distress thing going for him. Gert and Molly seemed to be sympathetic toward him, though Karolina seemed unimpressed. Nico felt it, but she had more practical concerns than patching up pretty boys who'd thrown themselves on the mercy of the Runaways.

"You're right," Nico told Molly, just to move things along. Eleven-year-old girls could be stubborn. "But there's a lot happening right now, so I want to focus on facts."

Zeke nodded. "Fair enough."

Dim lights cast a yellow glow on the table. Bottles of flavored water had been hastily arranged in the center after Chase and Gert had found them in a small galley kitchen beside the conference room, where they'd also made Zeke a cup of coffee. Nico assumed there must be a real kitchen somewhere, but now wasn't the time for the full tour.

"Start with the Nightwatch and your mother," Nico said. "Short version."

Zeke shook his head. His swollen and bruised face needed medical attention. For now, he'd just washed the blood off, but at the very least he needed an ice pack. That would also have to wait.

"I can't believe you guys don't know this stuff," he said. "I know the Pride kept you in the dark about a lot of things —"

"About everything," Gert said.

"Seems that way," Zeke admitted. "The easiest way to say this is that the Nightwatch is to San Francisco what the Pride was to L.A."

"So they also cut a deal with the Gibborim," Nico said.

Zeke frowned. “No. It’s not...Okay, I guess I’m backing up further. You guys know what the Gibborim are?”

“They’re the Elder Gods of the Earth,” Chase said, glancing awkwardly at Allis. “Should she be in here for all of this?”

Allis rolled her eyes. “Who am I going to tell? I don’t even have anywhere to go, never mind anyone to go *to*.”

Nico saw how unsteady Allis seemed, and wondered if the whack the girl had taken on the head had done more damage than to just knock her unconscious. Her eyes were glazed and she seemed pale, though that might have been her normal skin tone.

“Why don’t you have some water, Allis? You look like you’re about to pass out.”

Allis sighed. “If you want me to leave—”

“No, I mean it,” Nico said. “You don’t look good. Drink some water. And if you need to lie down, just go. Chase will help you get settled somewhere.”

Karolina took two bottles of flavored water, gave one to Allis, and opened one for herself. Nico looked back at Zeke, but now that she’d noticed how pale the girl looked she had started to worry. They probably should have brought her to a hospital—her and Zeke both. She wondered just how badly she was messing up this whole leader thing. Most of her life she’d been on the outskirts of other people’s friend groups. Maybe she’d always liked it that way or maybe she’d just grown to like it, but either way, Nico usually preferred to be alone. Sometimes she desperately needed it. Yet somehow here she was with these friends she would die for, and the loner girl, the girl on the outskirts, was in charge.

“Anyway,” Nico said, “the Gibborim. Elder Gods of the Earth. Hundred-foot, six-fingered, really frickin’ weird-looking giants. Existed before humanity, currently banished or at least retreated to some kind of limbo dimension. Definitely waiting for another crack at destroying humanity so they can return the world to the same people-free

paradise it was in their freakish glory days. That about sums it up.”

Zeke smiled, and winced as it caused him pain. “How many Gibborim are there?”

“Three that we know of,” Gert replied.

“That makes sense,” Zeke said thoughtfully. He glanced disappointedly into his empty coffee mug, then grabbed a bottle of water. “Now let me ask you another question. Did it never seem remotely bizarre to any of you that the Gibborim, these Elder Gods of the Earth, wanted to kill all of humanity, made a deal with your parents for immortality, blah blah blah, but somehow their power never extended beyond Greater Los Angeles, and your parents confined their criminal empire to the same area? I mean, these aren’t the Elder Gods of L.A., right?”

“Right,” Molly agreed.

Zeke sipped his water. “Yeah. Except *they are*.”

Karolina shifted in her chair. “Want to explain that?”

“The Gibborim aren’t the only Elder Gods left. Just the only ones left out of that tribe. There are major chunks of the planet that don’t have any, but there are other tribes left. The tribe that once ruled northern California and most of Oregon are called the Kurdogrim. Think of them as cousins to the Gibborim. There are at least four Kurdogrim left.”

Nico sat back, chair creaking beneath her. “So when you say the Nightwatch are the Pride of San Francisco, you’re being literal. Your mother and the rest of them—were they recruited the same way our parents were?”

Zeke shrugged. “Honestly, I like to appear cool and all-knowing but I don’t actually know all of the details on that. I know your parents made a deal. I know my mom and the other three members of the Nightwatch made a deal. There are a bunch of factions of Elder Gods battling for dominance, sort of behind the curtains of the world, but they’re fighting over scraps of power. None of them really

have the ability to do much beyond their territory without help. Your parents were making annual sacrifices to give the Gibborim a massive power-up so they could make their move, not just revert the Earth to proto-Eden or whatever, but to wipe out any of the other Elder Gods who tried to fight them.”

Molly put her feet up on the table. “Yeah, well we messed that plan up for them.”

“You did,” Zeke said. “They’re licking their wounds now. According to my mom, it cost them a lot of power when the Pride died. So much that the Gibborim can’t exert any control over L.A. at all right now. Which is why the Nightwatch is here.”

Nico drummed her fingers on the table. “They’re making a play for L.A., aren’t they? Your mom and the Nightwatch? They’re trying to claim the Gibborim’s territory and give it over to the Kurdogrim.”

“Exactly. They dragged us down here with them to help, and to see them in action. My mom told me that eventually they planned to split up, with half of the Nightwatch staying up north and the rest of us in L.A. The first thing on their to-do list was tracking down the Pride’s minions and taking them out.”

“We didn’t even know our parents *had* minions,” Chase said.

“They’re like this cult,” Gert explained to him, as Chase hadn’t seen them. “They’re the ones who took Allis. My guess is they’d already sacrificed at least a couple of street kids, using the same rituals our parents did. Allis would’ve been next—”

“But you guys got there in time!” Molly said with satisfaction.

“I’m not sure we did,” Karolina replied. “We’ll never know. That’s when the Nightwatch showed up and started killing the minions. It’s weird to say ‘minions.’ I keep

thinking of little yellow guys. Can we call them something else?”

Gert shifted awkwardly in her seat. “I don’t know that we need to call them anything anymore. I think they’re probably all dead or hospitalized.”

“Or running scared and not likely to ever come back to L.A.,” Nico added.

“But if they were followers of the Pride, I definitely feel like we need to find out, and take them down if they’re still up to evil shenanigans,” Gert finished.

Nico nodded. “No question. We’re not, like, patrolling for Super Villains or something, but I know we’re all on board with the idea of cleaning up whatever trouble the Pride left behind. We inherited their trouble. That said, one crisis at a time.”

She turned to stare at Zeke. “Which brings me back to you.” Something he’d said had stuck in her mind, and now she realized what it was. “You said ‘us.’”

“What?”

“‘They dragged us down to L.A.,’ you said. There are four members of the Nightwatch, right? But you said ‘us,’ so who else is part of ‘us’?”

All of Zeke’s swagger faded. Suddenly he looked much younger, his forehead creased with wonder and his eyes damp with unshed tears. “Yeah. Four members of the Nightwatch. My mom, Kathryn, has elemental powers. Wind, earth, that kind of thing. Abernathy—”

“The telekinetic,” Gert said.

“—then there’s the Ochoas. They’re married. She’s a shape-shifter and he’s—”

“Let me guess,” Nico said. “Teleporter with a sword fetish?”

“That’s Emilio Ochoa, yeah. Abernathy doesn’t have kids, but the Ochoas have two, Carlos and Tess. Our parents—the Nightwatch—they told us this was supposed to be our coming-of-age moment. The next generation. Yeah, we knew



about their powers, and we knew they'd done bad things before, but we never knew how bad. We trusted them—they're our parents—but now we know better. They were all recruited young by the Kurdogrim and they've been working in secret all along, so you've never seen them in, like, a Super Hero battle or something. Never seen them in the papers. They're too smart for that."

"Just like our parents were," Karolina said.

"Smart or evil," Chase muttered.

"Both," Zeke said, wiping at his eyes, clearly embarrassed by his show of emotion. "They brought us down here and they didn't try to soften what they were planning anymore, didn't try to hide what they were. When they told us they were going to kill the Pride's minions..."

He glanced around the table.

"...when they told us they were going to kill the five of you..."

Nico shivered.

"...we just couldn't go along with it," Zeke said. "I mean, rich and immortal sounds great, but murder? Maybe mass murder? Yeah, we were definitely not on board. They tried to force us, and we stood up to them. Fought them."

"You lost," Chase said.

Zeke shot him a withering look. "Yeah, thanks for rubbing that in, bro. I guess not everyone finds it as easy to murder their parents as you guys."

"Hey!" Molly barked. "That's really mean."

Zeke crumbled, sinking into his seat, eyes downcast.

"You're right. Sorry, that was uncalled-for. Point is, yeah, we lost. I got away thanks to Tess putting herself on the line. She and Carlos...they could be dead, for all I know, but if they're alive, I've got to save them."

Shuddering, he lifted his gaze and again he scanned the people seated around the table. "I've got to get Tess and Carlos back, and I've got to stop my mom and the rest of the Nightwatch. You all know what I'm going through. You've

been through something like it yourselves. You also know there's no way in hell I can do this alone, so I'm asking...will you help me? Because if you don't, I'm pretty sure me and my friends are gonna die. I'm also pretty sure the Nightwatch is gonna kill you all and take L.A. for themselves. The Nightwatch will pick up where your parents left off and innocent people will keep dying."

Silence fell over the room. Nico knew what she wanted to say. After all, it didn't seem like they had much of a choice. But leader or not, she wasn't going to decide anything for the rest of her team.

"I—" Gert started to say.

"Hang on." Nico held up a hand to cut her off. Then she looked at Chase. "I assume there are beds here. Rooms where Allis and Zeke can both clean up and try to get some rest."

"Of course. Wouldn't be much of a base without bunks."

She nodded. "Can you and Gert get them settled and then meet the rest of us back here so we can discuss this?"

Gert bristled a little. Nico saw it, realized that she'd offended her friend by interrupting, but that came with the territory. Someone had to be in charge. Nico noticed Zeke studying her. It might've been the way boys always studied her, checking out her hair and her legs and the contours of her face, but this felt different, as if Zeke had just noticed for the first time that she was a force to be reckoned with. Nico liked it.

"Sure," Chase said, pushing back his chair. "Let's go. If you want anything else to drink, I can hook you up on the way. Not much for snacks, though. The Pride were all about, like, dried kale chips and crap. Very L.A."

Zeke stood, but when Allis started to rise she swayed a little. Karolina caught her and held her for a moment to steady her. After a moment, Allis took a breath and thanked her, grabbed a second bottle of water, and followed Chase, Gert, and Zeke out of the room.

"I think she has a concussion," Karolina said.

The door closed, leaving just her, Molly, and Nico in the room.

Molly glanced at Nico. "We're going to help, right?"

"Let's wait till the others come back," Nico said. "This is a lot to take in all at once."

"Except for the part about these Nightwatch asswipes planning to kill us," Molly said. "That part's pretty clear."

"Molly," Karolina said. "Language."

"What? They're gonna try to kill us. *Asswipe* is just about the nicest thing I can think to call them."

Nico did not disagree.



**M**olly yawned. She tried to cover it with a stretch, but she'd been "stretching" for the past few minutes and she knew the others would notice. They'd been talking for an hour and it *was* super late, but she hated when anyone tried to send her to bed. Sure, it was probably like four in the morning by now, but she was eleven, not *eight*. They'd all been through the same things and she was the strongest and toughest of the group, so it didn't seem fair for anyone to try to *parent* her. Well, *mother* her, really, because Chase never treated her like a little kid the way the girls did.

Her brow furrowed with a memory of her conversation with him earlier that night—the conversation about school. Suddenly she didn't feel quite so much like letting Chase off the hook. Nico had started talking, and Molly yawned again. She saw Gert and Karolina glance at her, but nobody said anything about her going to bed.

*Try it, she thought. I dare you.*

Not that she'd ever have punched one of them or anything. She might not want them to parent her, but they

really had become her big brother and big sisters, and she trusted them more than she trusted anyone else on earth. Which was to say, as much as she trusted anyone after the way her life kept being turned upside down.

“You with us, Molly?” Nico asked.

She sat up straighter. Tugged her hat down a bit around her ears and tried to look more serious and mature. “Yes. I’m fine. Can you repeat that?”

Nico smiled, but it was a kind smile. “I was saying I really want to take a look around this place, but for now I’m exhausted and so I’m just going to trust that Chase has cleared it and that we’re safe here for now—”

“I gave Molly the tour earlier,” Chase cut in. “It’s safe, don’t you think, Mol?”

Molly nodded. “Definitely.”

“We all need sleep,” Nico said. “But even if we can let the grand tour wait until morning, we’ve got to agree on how to handle our guests.”

Gert hadn’t bothered to sit back down after Zeke and Allis had been brought to rooms where they could sleep. She leaned against the wall, hands jammed into the pockets of her oversize shorts. Molly thought she was cool, but also felt jealous that she hadn’t thought of standing up. If she’d been standing, she thought she might not be so sleepy.

“Listen,” Gert said, “I’m not inclined to trust anybody these days.”

“Me either,” Molly said, then blinked in surprise as she realized she’d said the words out loud.

Gert gestured toward her to acknowledge the support. “I’m guessing we all feel that way. But we’ve got them here, at least for tonight. We can’t put them out on the street now and I know none of us is eager to get the police involved. I don’t want to lock them into their rooms like prisoners, but I’m sure this place has some serious surveillance. Our parents were too paranoid to do anything without it.”

“You’re right about that,” Chase said. “I haven’t had time to learn the whole system, but there’s great security, surveillance everywhere, even motion sensors.”

“Perfect,” Gert said. “So we don’t lock them in, but you can set it up so that they’ll trigger an alarm if either of them goes wandering around tonight?”

Chase gave her a thumbs-up.

Molly gave them both a thumbs-down, plus a loud raspberry.

Nico frowned. “What’s that about?”

“It just feels gross. Our parents didn’t trust anyone. They didn’t even trust each other, or they wouldn’t have needed that much security.”

Karolina yawned, which made Molly feel a bit better.

“I know how you feel,” Karolina said. “And I like both of them. Or maybe I just feel bad for them. He’s been through a ton, and we’re just about the only people in the world who can really understand what he’s experiencing—”

“I don’t like him,” Chase said.

“You don’t like him because he’s prettier than you,” Nico muttered.

Chase shrugged. “Probably. Still don’t like him. I get a weird vibe off him. I don’t trust him.”

“—and Allis...” Karolina continued. “She’s a runaway. She has nobody. Every time I look at her, all I can think about is the girl we saw our parents murder that night, when we learned they were the Pride. We couldn’t save that girl, but now here’s Allis—”

“I know what you’re saying,” Nico interrupted. “But we’ve already saved Allis. How far does our responsibility to her go?”

“I’d say it goes at least a few days to let her recover from her injuries and try to figure out her next step,” Karolina replied, a bit sharply. “I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

“Neither do I,” Molly agreed. “Also, you guys interrupt Karolina a lot. Why do you do that?”

Nico looked stricken. Gert and Chase exchanged a thoughtful look.

"We do," Nico admitted, turning to Karolina. "I'm sorry. And you're right. I just wish we didn't have guests underfoot on our first night in this place. Chase and Molly say it's safe, and that's good enough for me—"

Molly frowned. She loved Nico, but she knew it *wasn't* good enough. Nico was the kind of person who needed to verify everything for herself. It was one of the things that made her a good leader, but it could be insulting and annoying.

"—but I wish we'd had a chance to feel comfortable and confident here before letting strangers in."

"We all do, I'm sure," Gert replied. "But it is what it is."

"And Zeke?" Chase said. "Okay, so we let Allis stay for a few days, but what do we do about this Zeke guy? We don't even know he's telling the truth."

"Well," Gert said, "he didn't lie about somebody beating the crap out of him. And we saw the Nightwatch down in that old subway station—we saw his mom. Those people were not playing games. At the very least, if we're letting Allis stay and recover, we need to do the same for Zeke."

"And look into the Nightwatch," Nico agreed. "We can't let them pick up where our parents left off."

"Them or anybody else," Karolina said.

"Chase, maybe tomorrow you can do some data-mining in the Pride's computer files, see if you find anything on the Nightwatch?"

"I can do that," Chase agreed.

Nico slid her chair back and stood. "Okay. Everything else can wait. Let's get some rest."

"Finally!" Molly said, exasperated. She jumped from her chair and marched toward the door. "Come on. I'll show you guys the rooms I picked out for you. They're fancier than you'd expect and the beds are super soft."

She paused at the door, trying to look alert. “Y’know, because you guys are all so tired. *I’m* not tired, but you guys seem exhausted.”

“Definitely,” Nico said. “But let’s check on our guests before we hit the sack, okay?”

“I’ll look in on Allis,” Karolina said.

“I’ll go set the motion sensors and alarms,” Chase announced.

Gert volunteered to check on Zeke once she’d found her own room. Molly noticed that this news made Chase’s brow furrow, but he didn’t say anything. Nico thanked Gert and then they were all moving out into the warren of corridors in their new hideout, tired and wondering what the morning would bring—at least Molly figured they were all feeling that way—but happy to be in a place they could call their own.

*The La Brea Tar Pits*, she thought. She wondered if she would dream of dinosaurs.

*That’d be nice. It’d be fun to dream of dinosaurs.*

Molly hadn’t had any nice dreams in a very long time.



Karolina knocked lightly, then stood outside Allis’s door. As tired as she was, she still felt a kind of strange exhilaration from the night they’d had—first the dancing and then the mystery of the missing girl, then the fighting and running for their lives. *I’m so weird*, she thought. Most people didn’t feel most alive when they were in peril of death. Or maybe they did? How did she know? How many people faced the real possibility of death multiple times a week? Soldiers, firefighters, police, daredevils...and Super Heroes.

The term *Super Hero* made her uneasy. The Runaways had powers—and, okay, hers were because she was from another planet—but that didn’t make them Super Heroes. They were just kids trying to get by in some pretty ugly



circumstances, and trying to help other people who found themselves in trouble. Yes, back on day one Gert had wanted them all to have Super Hero—style code names, and a part of Karolina had embraced that, but even then it had felt false. They weren't heroes. They were just survivors.

She glanced up and down the corridor. Molly was already in bed. Gert had gone off to find the room where Chase had put Zeke. Karolina felt bad she couldn't remember, but it had been that kind of day.

*Zeke*, she reminded herself. She thought of his bruised and bloody face and once again felt the connection the Runaways had with him. Zeke was a survivor, too.

So was Allis, in a different way. An innocent civilian. Karolina knocked softly again, then stared at the door. The wood had a dark gleam to it. Their new hideout had a bizarre medley of styles, which was no surprise given how different their respective parents had been. Magicians and scientists, time travelers and aliens. The decor reflected that odd variety, but the woodwork around the bedroom doors looked antique and hand-carved, and she wondered whose mom or dad had insisted on that.

Tired, Karolina stared at the door. She didn't want to barge in on the girl or sneak in and watch her sleeping like some creep. She raised her hand, thinking she'd knock one last time and then go off to discover her own new accommodations, but then she thought better of it. Chase had showed her where her room was, and right now all she wanted was to discover if the bed was as soft as Molly had claimed. Although, at the moment, Karolina thought she could have slept on a rock.

"Okay," she whispered to the closed door. "I hope you're okay."

She turned, pulling her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans to check the time. Past two a.m., which was earlier than she'd thought, but after the day they'd had it was more than late enough.

The door creaked open behind her.

“Karolina?”

She turned to see a sliver of Allis’s face as the girl peered out from the darkness at her. Her eyes held a flash of suspicion, a wariness that seemed quite unlike her. But, of course, Karolina had only just met her—how could she know what might be out of character for Allis?

“I’m sorry,” Karolina said quickly. “I’m just going to sleep and wanted to check on you. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

The wariness vanished from Allis’s eyes so completely that Karolina couldn’t be sure it had ever been there. “No,” the girl said. “No. It’s really nice of you.”

Allis opened the door and the light from the corridor cast a dim glow into the bedroom. Karolina saw the wooden sleigh bed and the matching furniture. She’d grown up privileged, but even so, the room was nicer than many hotel rooms she’d stayed in. Mostly, though, her focus was on Allis, whose red hair seemed much darker in the dim light, though somehow her skin looked even more pale. She wore the shirt she’d had on earlier and not much else, but she didn’t seem at all self-conscious.

“With what you’ve been through—you and your friends,” Allis said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She turned and moved back across the room, leading Karolina to follow. “I’m so grateful you were there for me tonight.”

She sat on the bed and tucked one leg up beneath her, pushing her hair back so she could watch Karolina come farther into the room. A high-backed wing chair occupied a space several feet from the bed, and Karolina perched on the edge.

Allis smiled softly. “You really are stunning, you know that?”

Karolina felt herself blush. “How’s your head?”

Allis reached up to gently prod her wound. “Not bleeding, which I guess is a plus. But it does hurt and I felt kind of

queasy before. I'm sure I have a concussion, but I don't think it's too bad. I mean, I still know my name."

Her arm rested on her pale thigh. Karolina stared at the bruises and chafe marks on her wrist, which had been bleeding earlier.

"Um, hello?" Allis said.

Karolina blinked, then smiled. "Sorry. I'm not staring, just thinking that we should have cleaned those cuts with something other than soap and water."

Presenting both wrists before her, Allis studied them. "I guess. But it'll wait till morning."

Karolina stood up. "I should get some sleep."

Allis did not rise from the bed, just watched her go. She looked pretty, there in the dark. Safe and comfortable and quiet and alone.

At the door, Karolina hesitated. "You should know we all talked, and we're cool with you staying a few days until you feel better and you can figure out what you want to do next."

For several seconds, Allis said nothing. She just sat in the shadows, watching Karolina.

"I mean, you don't have to—" Karolina began.

Then Allis did get off the bed. She rushed to Karolina and threw her arms around her, holding her tight. Her hair smelled of lilacs in bloom.

"I'd be dead if not for you," the girl whispered.

Karolina hugged her back. It felt peculiar to be sharing such an intimate moment with a virtual stranger. But good, too. Allis's gratitude, her rush of emotion, made Karolina feel that no matter what else she had been through, joy remained possible.

"I'm glad we found you," Karolina said. *In time*, she'd meant to add. She was glad they'd found Allis *in time*. But those extra words didn't seem very important. "Now, if you really do have a concussion, you need rest more than anything, so back to bed with you."

The words echoed between them.

"If you say so," Allis replied, and she arched a suggestive eyebrow, which Karolina didn't understand until after she'd said good night, closed the door behind her, and started walking down the corridor in search of her own room.

A good thing, too. If she'd caught the flirtation in that raised eyebrow and Allis's tone, she'd have blushed crimson, and blushing like a fool was never a good look for her.

But as she found her room, undressed, and slipped into bed, she wore a little smile that stayed on her lips long after she'd fallen asleep.



Zeke had left his door wide open. Gert felt her pulse quicken as she strode down the corridor toward his room. Had the guy already slipped away? Was he snooping around or trying to find the way out?

*Why are you so paranoid?* If Zeke had gone wandering through the new hideout, it was more likely he was looking for food or something to drink, or medical attention, given the condition the kid had been in when they'd let him on board the *Leapfrog*.

Gert heard a footstep and a soft grunt behind her and she jumped, startled, and spun with her fists up, ready to fight Zeke if she had to. Her heart thundered even as she saw that it had been Old Lace behind her. The dinosaur padded along, her claws making little ticking sounds on the floor, but otherwise very quiet for a creature her size.

"It's okay, girl," she whispered as Old Lace approached. The dinosaur cocked her head inquisitively. "I get it. I'm definitely on edge tonight, so of course you felt it."

Old Lace gave a warm chuff of breath from her nostrils as if in agreement.

"I love you so frickin' much," Gert said, cupping a hand behind Old Lace's head. She had no ears to scratch behind and no fur to ruffle, but she did tend to preen a bit when Gert stroked the back of her head.

Old Lace let out a satisfied *hrrrrmmm*.

"A lot of changes today," Gert whispered, pressing her forehead against Old Lace's snout. "But we'll get through it together."

The dinosaur flinched backward, snapped her head to one side, and narrowed her eyes. Gert turned to see that Zeke had poked his head through the open door of his guest room. Now he stepped into the corridor.

"Sorry. Not spying. I just heard your voice out here and wondered what was going on."

Gert put a hand on Old Lace's back to reassure her that everything was okay, although she knew the dinosaur would feel her emotions if she were to become alarmed or afraid.

"We wanted to check on you," Gert said. "I thought you'd be sleeping, but when I saw the open door I wondered if you'd gone looking for the bathroom or something."

Zeke smiled. Even with his bruises and the swelling on one side of his face, the smile still made butterflies take flight in Gert's chest. *Down, girl*, she thought. *You have a boyfriend*. It was stupid. No matter how charming Zeke might be, or how cute, she didn't know him. There were a million cute guys in L.A., and she didn't even like people. Half the time, she didn't even like Chase, as much as she loved him.

*Wait, you love him?* The thought made her flush.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Old Lace perked up curiously at her best friend's sudden discomfort.

"Not at all. Just tired," Gert said. "I've got to get some sleep, but is there anything you need?"

Zeke's smile vanished, his charm fading. "You mean besides a mom who isn't evil?"

The words dredged up painful emotions in Gert. She did her best to bury the worst of it, the sense that somehow she deserved whatever happened to her, that every breath she took must be tainted by the things her parents had done. She wondered if the other Runaways felt the same, wondered if they worried that they'd never live a day that didn't feel ruined before the sun had time to rise.

Old Lace sighed and began to prowl back along the corridor. She wanted to leave.

"You'll get out of her shadow," Gert told Zeke, though she wasn't sure she believed it. "We'll get your friends back and then all three of you can start fresh."

"With our parents dead or in prison," he said, absently touching the tender, bruised place on his ribs.

"Whatever happens is on them. Not you."

Zeke sighed. He turned to go back into the room they'd given him, but then glanced up at her. "Chase hooked me up with something for the pain, but I assume you don't have anything stronger? Percocet or Vicodin or something?"

"Must've left it in my other shorts," Gert said solemnly.

He laughed, then winced at the pain the laughter caused him. "Fair enough," he said. "Sleep will have to do it. It's just hard to turn my mind off. Between the beating I took and worrying about Tess and Carlos—"

"I don't have any pain pills," Gert said, cutting him off, "but if it's sleep that's the issue, I'm pretty sure there's some melatonin in my stuff on board the *Leapfrog*. Old Lace and I would be happy to get it for you."

Zeke leaned against the doorframe. "This life is so weird. Sure, Gert. I'd love it if you and your dinosaur would get me something to help me sleep. That's not at all a weird thing to say."

She smiled.

"Go lie down. We'll be back."

Zeke thanked her. As Gert walked away, she felt a powerful sympathy for him, but at the same time she

wanted only to curl up in her new bed—a real bed of her own was something she had been dreaming about for a long time. She'd had enough of running around, enough of hiding. Sometimes she thought that it would have been better if they'd never learned the truth about their parents, even if that meant the Pride could have continued to do all the hideous things they'd been doing for so many years. She hadn't been happy, exactly, back in those innocent, ignorant days, but at least she'd felt safe. At least she'd felt protected. But every time she caught herself succumbing to the allure of the past, she remembered seeing her parents participate in the murder of a teenaged girl, and she knew that wishing for her ignorance back meant wishing the Pride had been able to continue doing that.

As Old Lace padded along beside her, Gert grew less tired and more angry. Who the hell did the Nightwatch think they were, coming into L.A. and trying to take it for themselves? The Runaways had stopped the Pride—their own parents! They sure as hell weren't going to let somebody else pick up where the Pride had left off.

She moved through the quiet base with a fresh sense of purpose. Chase wasn't there when she reached the *Leapfrog*, but that was all right. She wanted time to herself right now. Or time for herself and Old Lace. Somehow her exhaustion had given way to a clarity she hadn't felt in a long time, and Zeke's story had given her that.

Intending to thank him, she got her backpack, found the melatonin, and threaded her way back through the base to his room. This time the door was closed, and Gert knocked softly before opening the door, only to discover that Zeke hadn't needed the melatonin after all. He'd fallen fast asleep, sprawled across the bed, still in his bloody clothes.

The guy looked peaceful.

But with the fresh purpose ignited in her, Gert knew that, for her, both sleep and peace would be difficult to come by tonight.



Chase felt like he had sand in his eyes and his bones were made of lead. He was only eighteen years old, so pulling an all-nighter ought to have been easy enough, at least according to a thousand crappy movies and TV shows he'd seen. Admittedly there had been plenty of nights he'd stayed up later than this playing video games and barely felt the weariness of the hour. But it had been a long-ass day, and programming the tech-sentries for the base didn't inspire him the way, say, exploring a haunted radioactive space station on his Xbox did.

Plus the whole thing felt weird. He'd been thrilled when he had cracked the encrypted file that let him locate this Pride base. The secrecy had been exciting. He'd snuck over here a few times to explore and had planned to do some more preparation before revealing the place to the other Runaways. Sunstroke crashing their S.H.I.E.L.D. squat had sped up his schedule, but it had still felt nice to be able to give this place to his friends. For once, he felt like the hero of the day, like he'd done something tangible to help them, not just in a fight but with their lives. Chase had christened their old place—where they'd hid out when they'd first run away from their parents—the Hostel. He figured this was the Hostel now, although he'd yet to use that word in front of anyone else.

A strange, unsettling feeling had been ping-ponging around in the back of his head since he'd first discovered the place. It had been low-level at first, background noise, but now that the excitement of secrecy and revelation had passed and everyone had a bed to sleep in, it had returned.

He slid his chair from one array of computer screens to the next. The files here were still mostly encrypted, but the executive functions—things like security—felt familiar and intuitive. It had taken him some time to sort out the coding



for different floors and corridors, but now that he had, activating the motion sensors and alarms in the specific locations he wanted would be simple enough. The others would pat him on the back for that intuition, but as usual, the real brilliance had belonged to his parents. The new Hostel's systems had been designed by them, and Chase relied on a lifetime of watching them work to sort it all out.

*Maybe that's it, he thought. They're haunting you.*

And they were. His parents weren't actual ghosts looming in the shadows, but they were here, in every bit of computer code, in every one of the Hostel's defenses and tech systems. It felt intimate, as if they were still with him. If anyone had asked, even Gert, he'd have said he didn't miss them—that the evil they'd done made him hate them. And he *did* hate them, wished he could scream in their faces and rage at them for their lies and their sins. Yet somehow he still yearned for their voices.

Chase's fingers froze above the keyboard and he slumped his shoulders. Just a few more minutes and he could get some rest. Maybe in the morning he could figure out how to be happy again that he'd found this place. Tonight he wanted to be anywhere else.

*Tap tap. Tik tik tik.* That was it. The motion sensors were activated outside Allis's and Zeke's rooms. Alarms would sound if they stepped into the hallway before eight a.m., at which point Chase knew Nico would be awake, even if the rest of them were sleeping. Nico didn't sleep much these days.

He stretched, slid his chair back, and logged out of the Hostel's security system. The quiet in the cavern seemed to swallow him up, and it creeped him out so much that he wondered if Gert might still be awake. Half the time they were together it felt like the old days, when most of their interactions had been him saying something stupid and her verbally smacking him for it. She felt like his life preserver.

She'd become not just his girlfriend but his best friend. He didn't know what he'd do without her.

Music played low at the other computer array. Old music from the Cure that seemed good company this late at night, somehow cheerful and sad at the same time. He slid his chair back over, remembering the way he'd always done the same thing in his parents' lab when they'd let him hang out in there and watch them work. He liked the sound of the chair's wheels on the floor.

With a few taps, he woke the multiple screens, then killed the music. The silence yawned around him and he shivered, stood, and rubbed his tired eyes.

The computer started to buzz, a steady intermittent noise that made him frown and swear under his breath. A quick glance back at the other computer array assured him that this wasn't the motion sensor alarm he'd just programmed.

The rhythmic buzz drilled into his brain.

"Well, that's not irritating at all," he muttered, sitting back down and staring at the computer array.

Something twitched at the bottom of the left-hand computer screen. He clicked on the spot, bringing up a banner that ran along the length of it, nearly twenty small icons. Some were familiar and others he'd never seen before. One of those bounced in time with the buzzing, hopping slightly higher on the screen, pulsing. The icon looked like a stylized metal gate, the sort of thing one might find in front of a haunted house, but broken diagonally with the two parts slightly misaligned. Chase double-clicked, launching an app called Gatecrashers, which blossomed into unusually clear surveillance footage.

Maybe because he was so tired, it took him a few seconds to realize the video unfurling on the screen was live. A small red light blinked in the upper right-hand corner of the screen, somehow adding to the impression that the events were happening that very moment.

Chase frowned, used the mouse to find the audio, but found that it was working fine. Like most surveillance video, this was silent. Even without sound, though, he could make out what was happening. Someone had smashed in the front doors of the Hamilton F. Deeley Museum of Fine Art, and they'd done it without any subtlety at all. The cops would be on their way, would get to the museum in minutes. Chase started to move the cursor over to close the window, but two things stopped him. The first was the question of why anyone with the ability to smash in the doors like that would be stupid enough to do it so brazenly. The second was why the Pride would have a dedicated app in their system that would alert them of a crime like this, something the police would take care of.

The answer came a second later, when someone stepped out of the ruined museum doorway, some guy in blue-and-red armor obviously ripped off from Stark or Stane International. But it wasn't the armored guy that tipped Chase off—it was the guy who emerged behind him.

"Sunstroke," he muttered.

He had no idea how the asshole had gotten out of jail so fast—unless the cops had never taken him into custody in the first place—but there he was. Which meant that the armored guy must also be part of the new Masters of Evil... and that whatever they were up to, the Crimson Cowl was behind it.

*Gatecrashers*, he thought. His parents had created an app that informed the Pride when someone in L.A. was committing a crime that they hadn't authorized.

Three o'clock in the morning, and suddenly Chase wasn't tired anymore.

As he raced off to wake the others, he hoped they would feel the same.



## SEVEN

**A** couple of hours before dawn on what felt like the longest night of her life, Nico sat in the back of the *Leapfrog* and tried to find some music to wake them all up. All kinds of music had been loaded into the *Frog's* onboard system, and plenty more since Chase had been her pilot, mechanic, and owner. She found some nineties post-punk that was appropriately head-banging and the music blared loudly.

Karolina shushed her, and Nico looked over to see Molly curled up in her seat, half-asleep and wincing, covering her ears. Nico turned the music down but not off. Understandably, Molly wanted to keep sleeping, but they all needed to be awake and alert for this.

"So on a scale of one to furious," Karolina asked, leaning toward the cockpit, "how pissed was Gert, do you think?"

Chase guided the *Frog* into its next leap, a long glide to the top of a fifteen-story office tower. It was cloaked as always—if the stealth mode held. He glanced back at them, dark circles under his eyes from exhaustion.

"Seriously?" he said with a scowl. "What do you think?"

Nico rolled her eyes. "Either of you have a better idea?" Neither of them did.

"Someone had to stay behind," Nico went on. "Chase pilots the *Frog* and at least has some gizmos to whip out if he needs to blast something or someone. The rest of us have powers. Old Lace might be able to bite someone's face off, but we couldn't leave Zeke and Allis in the new Hostel by themselves."

Chase glanced over his shoulder at Karolina. "In answer to your question—pretty frickin' pissed."

"Eyes front," Nico said. "Don't crash."

"Yes, Oh Fearless Leader."

Nico sighed. She wasn't fearless, and she'd never wanted to be leader. She couldn't help it if she was the best person for the job.

"Why are we even doing this?" Karolina asked. Her usual cheerful mood apparently vanished when she'd only had half an hour's sleep. "This is a job for the Avengers or somebody. Definitely not us. This is not what we do, Nico. Sunstroke attacked us, not the other way around. We didn't go out looking for him. We're talking about the Masters of Evil here, or some variation anyway. Maybe we can take one of them, but we don't even know how many of these guys the Crimson Cowl has with her."

"Hey, have a little more faith in us," Chase said, as the *Frog* leaped again.

"That's not the point."

Nico shut off the music. She loved Karolina and trusted her, but she wished her friend would have a little faith in her.

"You know why."

"I don't."

"First, the Avengers aren't here, are they? Chase, you've got the surveillance feed from the Hostel's computer linked up there, right? You see any Avengers showing up at the museum?"

“Not so much as a Hawkeye. Though, to be fair, Wonder Man’s the only one who does a lot in L.A.,” Chase said. “Wait, is Wonder Man even alive?”

“That’s always the question, isn’t it?” Karolina muttered. “My parents did a film with Simon Williams once. I never met anyone more in love with himself.”

“Second,” Nico continued, ignoring their tangent, “do you not remember why the Masters of Evil are here to begin with? Why the Crimson Cowl is making her move?”

“Of course I do. We talk about it every day. The Pride is gone. Evil rushes in to fill the void. Blah blah blah. I get it, but not everything that happens in L.A. is on us now, Nico. We’re not Super Heroes. And even if we were, we can’t do anyone much good if the Masters of Evil kill us all. How many times do we want to risk our lives for this city?”

Molly made a little raspberry, sticking her tongue out, revealing that she hadn’t been quite as asleep as they’d thought.

“They’re not going to kill us,” she said, sitting up and tugging her hat down further on her head. “I’m gonna whup their asses.”

“Molly—” Karolina began.

The girl turned to her, eyes clear and intelligent. “I know, Kay. Punching doesn’t solve everything. I also know that as strong as I am, there will always be someone stronger. We live in a world with at least one Hulk, so *duh*. But the police aren’t going to be able to stop them, and the Avengers aren’t here. I don’t care about some stupid paintings—I don’t know why the Losers of Evil want to rob a museum. It’s, like, the twenty-first century. Who does that? But you know they’re planning something bigger than that or Sunstroke wouldn’t have tried to steal our secret S.H.I.E.L.D. base. So yeah, I want to stop them. If we don’t at least try, we might as well go back into foster care like regular orphans.”

The *Leapfrog* jostled a bit as it landed on another building, then swayed as it leaped again.

Nico stared at Molly. “Y’know—”

“I know,” Molly said.

“What do you know?”

“That eleven is a weird age. You’ve said it before.”

Karolina nodded slowly. “It’s true. You’re a kid, and—no offense, I love you, but you can be pretty grumpy—”

“And pushy—” Chase said from the cockpit.

“—but sometimes we forget that you’re not a *little* kid.”

Molly huffed. “I’m almost twelve.”

“Going on thirty-five,” Nico added. “And way sharper and smarter than we give you credit for.”

“True, true,” Molly said, nodding sagely.

“Um, guys...” Chase began. “Not to interrupt the Molly-rocks fest back there, but...Whirlwind.”

“Sorry?” Karolina said.

Keeping his hands on the controls, Chase tilted his head toward a screen in front, where the surveillance feed from the museum kept rolling, live but in silence.

Nico leaned forward and stared at the feed. Sure enough, on the grainy live feed she saw a figure she recognized from countless news stories. Whirlwind—human tornado, notorious criminal, had fought the Avengers and other heroes what seemed like a thousand times. He’d been part of previous lineups of the Masters of Evil.

“Still want to do this?” Karolina asked.

“Like Molly says, we don’t have a choice,” Nico replied.

“Let’s go, then. All in. Even if we can buy some time, maybe catch one of them—”

“Well,” Molly said, “I didn’t stay up all night just to be a frickin’ spectator.”

Chase cleared his throat. He maneuvered the *Leapfrog*, guiding them to the right, and they came to rest on top of a building with a neon billboard gleaming overhead.

“We’re here,” he said. “Let’s move. And let’s try not to die.”



Gert sat in the main cavern of the Hostel, nursing a green tea and her hurt feelings. She knew it was stupid—the logic of leaving her behind had been inarguable. But it was three o’clock in the morning and her whole body wanted to be sleeping. At first she had wished that she’d been able to go with them, but with every stretch and yawn and every rub of her itchy eyes, her irritation faded. At this point, she was almost happy to have been left behind.

She’d been drinking her tea and listening to the audio from the mission. Chase had set it up so that they could get the surveillance feed from the Pride’s tech on-screen in the *Leapfrog*, but he’d also set up communications between the *Frog* and the Hostel. Gert had listened but tried not to butt in—she figured they’d probably forgotten she was even listening, which was fine with her. She was there as backup. If things went really badly—badly enough that they were willing to give up everything, including their freedom—she knew how to get in touch with the Avengers. The last time, Captain America had basically betrayed them. He’d thought he was doing what was right, she knew that. But adults often screwed kids over while thinking it was for their own good. They’d ended up in the foster care system, and Gert had no intention of risking a repeat of that unless the worst happened.

As she listened, Chase landed the *Leapfrog*. She heard him suggest to the others that they try not to die, and she opened her mouth to chime in, but something stopped her. Frowning, she looked at the computer showing the surveillance feed from the museum. Whirlwind had come out onto the front steps, but now she watched him twist into



a green-and-white mini-tornado and he swept back inside, followed by Sunstroke, leaving only the blue-armored guy outside. Something about all of this didn't feel right, but she couldn't put her finger on precisely what was bothering her.

*I don't know why the Losers of Evil want to rob a museum,* Molly had said. *It's, like, the twenty-first century. Who does that?*

Gert sipped her green tea, pondering. After a moment she set it down, slid the chair over to the other computer array, and called up a satellite map of the neighborhood around the museum. Block by block, she zoomed in enough that the program began to identify the restaurants and businesses and landmarks there.

She clicked on the microphone. "Hey, guys? Has anyone actually seen the Crimson Cowl?"

No answer.

Gert turned to stare at the surveillance monitor. "Guys?"

On the screen, Molly had arrived at the bottom of the museum's front steps. The guy in the blue armor shifted and cocked his head, obviously tracking her, wondering what the hell a little girl was doing out on the street at three a.m.

Molly started up the steps.



The armored guy didn't look a thing like Iron Man. Molly had met Iron Man, and though she'd seen pictures and video of him in a bunch of different versions of his armor, you could always tell it was him. The color scheme gave him away—well, that and something else, a kind of design sense that Molly had learned to recognize. Tony Stark might not always be in the suit, but the suit would always be Tony Stark, almost like he'd put his signature on it. *Like an autograph,* Molly thought, as she took another step.

“Guys,” Gert said in her ear. Molly ignored her. Now wasn’t the time.

“What are you doing out here, kid?” the blue-armored man asked, his voice sounding tinny over whatever speaker the armor used.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Molly told him, still walking. Another step. “You guys made a lot of noise.”

The blue-armored man glanced back at the hole he and his pals had smashed or burned through the face of the museum. He was confused, and Molly knew that was good. If he thought she was homeless and they’d woken her up, it would slow him down. Just like it would slow him down just to be looking at the face of an innocent-seeming young girl. Molly knew she appeared harmless. It was half the reason she always wore one of the knit hats she loved. Tonight, her hat was the orange-red of fox fur, complete with fox ears. Karolina had bought it for her just a couple of weeks ago in a Salvation Army store.

Gert’s voice came over the comms again, more urgently this time. “Guys, is anyone even listening? Do any of you have eyes on the Crimson Cowl? Has anyone seen her?”

*Eyes on*, Molly thought. Gert had been watching too many action movies. She giggled to herself, and didn’t try to hide it.

“Look, kid,” the blue-armored man said. “You should go, okay? The cops will be here any minute. It could get messy. Find somewhere to hide.”

Molly kept walking. “That’s actually kinda sweet, you being worried about me. What’s your name, mister?”

The guy started down toward her. “Blue Steel. But seriously, kid, you need to—”

“That’s not very original,” Molly told him. “I mean, there’s no way Tony Stark hasn’t used that for something, right?”

“What do I care? I didn’t come up with...” He sighed loud enough that it was audible over the armor’s speaker. “Look,

kid, you're not listening."

Molly wanted to get closer, but she felt the night get suddenly warm and then saw movement just past Blue Steel. Through the ruined doors, she saw Sunstroke approaching. Any second, he'd step outside. Any second, he'd spot her.

"I don't feel so good," she said. Purposely, she stumbled and fell to her hands and knees on the steps.

"Damn it," Blue Steel muttered.

Molly felt kind of bad as he bent to check on her. He might be one of the Losers of Evil, but he seemed like he might be sort of a nice guy when he wasn't busy being a criminal.

"Kid? Kid, you okay?" he said as he reached for her.

Molly punched him in the chest so hard that the armor crumpled and sparked. He let out a grunt of pain and staggered backward, but by then she was up. The trick to being an eleven-year-old girl with super strength was finding your center of balance. She picked up Blue Steel like he was made of Nerf.

"You're pretty trusting for a bad guy," she said.

Sunstroke stepped out the door, took in the moment, and turned to shout back inside. Molly hurled Blue Steel at him. The armored man crashed through the already ruined entrance, smashing it further and colliding with Sunstroke, and the two of them went sprawling hard into the museum's foyer.

"Two down," she said, knowing the others would hear her over the little earpiece communication devices Chase had rustled up inside the Hostel. "No idea how many—"

Gert's voice cut in again. "Is nobody listening to me? Hello?"

Then Nico. "Um, Gert, we're a little busy."

"Being kept busy, I think."

Molly was glad the bad guys couldn't hear them.

Inside the museum foyer, Blue Steel had started to rise, but slowly. Sunstroke stayed down, and the armored guy nudged him, started to swear. Molly took a couple of steps closer to them. If Sunstroke was down, she could take Blue Steel no problem.

“Talk fast, sweetie,” Chase said on comms. “What are you saying?”

Molly heard tires squealing and engines roaring. She turned around and her eyes widened as police cars began to skid to a halt in the street in front of the museum, lights flashing. She and her friends had hoped to take the Losers down before the cops got there. Police meant guns, guns meant bullets. Ordinary cops had no chance to capture the Masters of Evil, but it was their job to try. The other problem was that Molly and most of the Runaways were still underage and...well, runaways. Not that the police were going to pay much attention to them right now—at least, not until they started using their powers.

She heard Nico in her ear again. “This is going to get very messy, very fast.”

“Is it ever any other way with us?” Karolina asked.

But they didn’t know the half of it, because Molly turned to see Blue Steel rising to his feet just inside the museum.

“I don’t know what the hell you are, kid,” the armored guy said, “but you shouldn’t have done that. In fact, if you’re smart, you’ll run like hell right now. Sunstroke’s got a broken arm, I think. The boss is gonna be pissed—”

Molly wanted to laugh and say something cool, but the police were shouting and drawing their guns. Blue Steel thrust out his left hand and shot an energy blast from his palm that made a police car explode, and Molly knew she was a liability for the police, that they’d hesitate to shoot with her on the stairs. Not that shooting would help much against a guy in armor tech.

“No!” she snapped, and started up toward Blue Steel again.

He held out both hands. “Kid, I will blast you all the way to Vegas if you don’t back off.”

Gunshots rang out. Molly ducked out of instinct, annoyed that the cops hadn’t held their fire. Nico and Gert and Karolina and Chase were all shouting over their comms, trying to tell her what to do—and Molly had started to get very sick of people telling her what to do.

A wave of heat rolled over her. She looked up and saw Sunstroke stepping out through the ruined museum entrance, cradling his broken arm. But then he stepped aside and she saw the green-and-white blur rushing from deep inside the museum. Whirlwind’s arms and head and shoulders emerged from the tornado of his powers and he burst out through the entrance.

“Karolina, go!” Molly shouted.

The laser blast seemed to come from nowhere. It hit Whirlwind in the back, smashed him to the steps, but he was up in a heartbeat.

“Oh, crap,” Karolina said, her voice a little frightened over the comms.

Then Whirlwind blasted after her and Karolina took off, streaking across the still-dark sky. Leaving Molly on the steps between the cops and two pissed-off Masters of Evil. Most of the time she didn’t feel like a little kid, but in that moment, she felt very small.

“Nico?” Molly called, hoping she’d be heard. “Nico!”



“Karolina!”

She heard her name over the comms, but only barely. Molly and Gert were both calling for Nico simultaneously. Chase kept asking if he should move in with the *Leapfrog*. Karolina was very happy in that moment that Nico was

supposed to be in charge and not her, but right now Nico was shouting her name and Whirlwind was on her tail.

“Karolina!”

“What? I’m airborne!”

She zipped left, then straight up. Whirlwind couldn’t change direction as sharply as she did, but he was so fast that it didn’t matter. She felt the wind at her back as she zipped right, then left, then straight over the top of a building and down the other side, gaining distance. Just a bit, but she knew it wouldn’t buy her much time.

“Listen to me, you’ve got to get back to Molly. Get her out of there.”

“I’m kinda trying not to die!”

“If you don’t get back there fast, Molly’s gonna be the dead one.”

Karolina felt her heart skip a beat. No way. Nothing was going to happen to Molly. She felt the wind behind her, reached out an arm and blasted out an office window, then turned and flew inside, zipping along corridors and blowing open doors. Whirlwind followed. Walls exploded from the force of the air raging around him, but he couldn’t maneuver the way she could. A door blew off its hinges behind her and nearly clipped her, but she dodged just in time, burst through a long glass window-wall of a conference room, and then smashed outside again, angry with herself for the damage but desperate to live and to save Molly.

She raced across the sky, banked above the hotel they’d landed on. From behind the neon billboard, the *Leapfrog* began firing its laser cannons at Whirlwind, just like she’d hoped.

“Way to go, Chase!” she shouted.

“Bought you a second. Just get Molly!”

Karolina poured on the speed, swept down from the sky in an arc that put her right between the cops and the Masters of Evil.

“Mol, shut your eyes!” she called.

Then she lit up the night with pastel fireworks, painting the sky and the buildings with brilliant colors. The cops shielded their eyes, many of them taking cover, none of them able to shoot while the glare momentarily blinded them. Karolina landed on the steps just a few feet from Molly, who raced toward her and leaped into her arms. Nearer to the entrance of the museum, Sunstroke was cursing loudly and covering his eyes, but Blue Steel only watched the two girls, and Karolina realized his armor must be shielding his eyes from the brightness. He could see them perfectly, but he was making no effort to stop them. After a second, he seemed to remember he ought to be reacting and turned away, halfheartedly raising a hand as if he needed to cover his eyes.

“Hang on,” she said.

Molly wrapped her arms sleepily around her and Karolina took off, darting up and to the right, above and behind the museum, out of the line of fire. Her heart raced but she felt herself exhale, able to focus on the voices in her ear.

“Nico,” Gert was saying. “Tall silver building right behind you? The one that says XandraWest?”

“What about it?” Molly asked.

Karolina landed on the museum roof and put her down. The two of them had turned to look at the silver building that stood like a dagger, stabbing the sky.

“What is—” Nico began.

“This whole thing’s a smokescreen,” Gert said. “The Crimson Cowl’s in there. You want to end this before those cops get killed, you’ve got to get to her.”

“Gert,” Karolina said, “how do you know that? You’re not even here.”



In the chilly, lonely cavern inside the new Hostel, Gert sat at the computer array and grinned to herself.

"Something Molly said."

"Yeah! What'd I say?"

"That nobody robs a museum in the twenty-first century. That might not be true, but the Masters of Evil aren't going to steal a bunch of art that they'll never be able to sell without being tracked down. Maybe a private collector, but...anyway, doesn't matter. I started looking around the neighborhood to see what else was there. That building, XandraWest? It's a research firm. They were contracted with the government to develop the ultimate data-mining tool, something called Skeleton Key, that would basically open any encrypted system. They wouldn't have to hack anything, they could just...go right in."

"You think that's what the Cowl wants?" Nico asked.

"I could be totally off, but it makes sense. The last Cowl was Justine Hammer. There's always been a tech element to whoever's in that outfit. Now her goons are out there making a spectacle right across from that building, but there's no sign of her? I think she's sneaking around XandraWest, trying to find something *really* worth stealing."

Chase chimed in: "How do we find her? The building's huge."

"That's on you, Chase. Somewhere in the Pride's files there's one on the Cowl. Justine Hammer is dead. Point is... the cowl itself is technology from Hammer or Stane Industries. Can you track it?"

"I can try."

Nico swore. "Try fast, Chase. And pick me up on the way. I'm going in."

"Be careful!"

"Will do," Nico replied. "And Gert...good job."

Gert wanted to say something about making herself useful. Nico might be leader, but she wasn't the only girl on the team capable of thinking on her feet.



But before Gert could open her mouth again, an alarm started blaring in the cavern. She whipped around to stare at the computer array. One screen had switched over to security cameras inside the base. She stared at the split screen, searching for someone moving, for some sign that Allis or Zeke had started snooping around in the darkened corridors of the Hostel.

A voice made her jump. "Is that noise all for me?"

Gert spun again to find Zeke standing behind her, shirtless and too close.

She hit him with a right cross that knocked him on his ass, blood streaming from his nose.

Molly would have been proud.



**EIGHT**

**N**ico's mind spun. It felt like the seconds unfurling before her were a puzzle and she had to put the pieces together exactly right. Police officers were going to die. Her friends might die. Bullets were flying and she had no time to fix any mistakes she might make. Whatever she did next, she wouldn't get a second chance before something went so wrong it couldn't be made right.

"Chase," she said. "Make me a hole."

The *Leapfrog* perched on the roof of an office building adjacent to XandraWest. It swayed in the wind, but Nico trusted Chase not to let the *Frog* tumble. He shot her an anxious look.

"You sure? We make that kinda noise, the Cowl will know we're onto her. She'll know you're coming."

Nico smiled. "Definitely not sure. But I know this much—the Crimson Cowl, whoever she is right now, is going to be cocky as hell. Anyone willing to call themselves a Super Villain and arrogant enough to try to build a gang called the

Masters of Evil...they don't expect to have their plans trashed by a bunch of teenagers."

"You do know this isn't *Scooby-Doo*, right?"

Nico held on to the staff. "Just do it. Leap and don't freak when I open the door."

"Maybe some magic—"

"Chase!"

"Going!"

He worked the *Leapfrog's* controls and the ship lunged from the rooftop toward the gleaming silver tower of XandraWest. With the flick of a thumb, Chase fired a laser at a row of windows on the twenty-first floor. Nico spared an errant thought for the street below, but in the predawn darkness, the sidewalk was empty.

Nico hit the hatch control and it sprang open. The *Leapfrog* crashed into the side of the building, legs scrabbling a bit as Chase guided it inside the cubicle-filled office space. Nico jumped out with a flurry of paperwork whirling past her as the wind rushed into the building.

"Go!" Nico told Chase. "Help the others."

The *Frog* scrambled, hatch closing, nearly falling out of the hole in the side of the silver tower. With Chase at the helm, it leaped away. Nico stood alone in that vast span of cubicles. Power lines sparked and danced and a piece of the floor gave way, allowing a desk to slide right out of the building. Aside from the wind, it seemed eerily quiet.

*What the hell am I doing?* she thought.

"I'm committed now," she said aloud.

Karolina chimed in over the comms. "Whatever you're planning, do it now."

Nico nodded. She loved her friends, but in her heart, she preferred it this way—on her own. If she'd dared to say out loud that she thought they needed her to lead, every single one of them would have mocked her, or at least had their feelings hurt. Maybe not Karolina—Kay would understand. Chase and Gert would think she was arrogant. Full of herself.

And, hell, maybe that was true. But it was also true that Nico only led the Runaways because she loved them, and feared for them, and felt obligated to keep them safe because she knew she was the best one for the job.

*You are so damn conceited,* she thought.

Yet, conceited or not, leadership put pressure on her. Trying to keep on top of things in the middle of a fight, to get them working as a team in combat, was a huge responsibility. But here, in the quiet, by herself, she could just be Nico. For a few minutes, she only had herself to worry about—only had herself to keep safe.

*So, of course, you'll probably die,* she thought.

Not so confident after all.

The Staff of One felt strangely warm in her hand as she started weaving her way through the labyrinth of cubicles. She had no way of knowing what floor the Crimson Cowl might be on. Gert could probably find a blueprint for the building's layout, tell her where this or that lab might be, but that would all take precious time. Whatever the Cowl might be doing, she was going to move fast now that she knew she wasn't alone in the building. Nico had thought maybe coming in hard and fast would alarm her, send her scurrying, make her call off the whole plan. Now she felt stupid.

"Hey, Gert, it's too late for this but...how sure are you that the Cowl's even here? We just blew a huge hole in the side of a building. Repairs are going to cost—"

"Nico, don't second-guess yourself," Chase said, breaking in over the comms. "Gert's hunches are better than most people's for-sures. Find the Cowl."

Nodding as if her friends could see her, Nico held the Staff of One in front of her. Word choice was everything with the magic she had at her disposal, and it took her a few seconds to realize just what she wanted to say. With the staff, simple was always best, but she had to be clear and focused.

*“One Step Behind Her.”*

As Nico spoke the words, intoned the spell, she felt the Staff of One grow warm. A silent cloak of glittering darkness enshrouded her and she blinked it away. Blinked again, and the darkness dissipated. She had no idea what floor she was on, or if she was even still in the XandraWest building, but she stood so close behind the Crimson Cowl that she could smell the scents on the woman—something soft, maybe a body wash or shampoo, along with a crisp metallic scent, like an electrical spark. They were in some kind of lab or research space, its glass surfaces scrawled with mind-boggling math formulas. In the center of the room was a chamber about eight feet high and equally wide, made of triple panes of thick glass, or something like glass. Inside sat what looked like a computer workstation, a high-backed chair—nothing fancy—and a black monitor, attached to a weird box about as tall as Nico herself. Black and gleaming like graphite, it had a single red eye that traveled back and forth across its face like a heart monitor from hell.

The Crimson Cowl took a step toward it. Nico knew the costume wasn't supernatural, that this was just a woman in a tight red bodysuit and a flowing, hooded cloak that also masked her face. Cloak, cowl, it didn't matter what word Nico used in her head, it still creeped her the hell out because it moved like it had a mind of its own. The bottom hem of the cowl stayed just off the ground as if floating, and its forward edges reached ahead as if they yearned to touch the thing in that glass cage.

Nico took a breath. She held out the Staff of One.

The back of the cowl snapped toward her. Nico twisted the staff and held it across her chest in defense, but the cowl still struck hard enough to knock her sprawling backward. She smashed to the ground on her side, slid into the base of a column, and grunted in pain as the impact made her let go of the staff.

Cursing, Nico scrambled up. As she moved, the cowl smashed the column. Exposed, vulnerable, Nico stared at the Crimson Cowl.

"Where did you come from, little girl?" the woman asked. "Halloween Town?"

Nico sneered. "Fashion insults? I guess that's the best a D-List Super Villain can manage."

She hoped the words sounded brave, that the Crimson Cowl wouldn't hear the quaver in her voice. Whoever she was behind the mask, the cowl itself was just as intimidating as she'd feared. The cloak portion of it moved like Medusa's hair or Aladdin's carpet. Nico knew it was tech, that the cowl was prehensile and controlled by the wearer's mind, but it seemed like black magic to her, and though she used magic herself it still scared the crap out of her.

"Powers?" the Crimson Cowl asked, cocking her head. "No? Then you're almost too stupid to kill. Keep out of my way, girl."

She turned, starting toward the glass room again, toward the obelisk with its scanning red eye. It had to be the tech Gert had talked about. Nico would thank her later, if she was alive to do so.

The Staff of One lay on the floor about six feet away, just beyond the wreckage of the destroyed column. Nico felt puzzle pieces clicking together again in her mind. One-on-one, the Cowl would murder her. No way could she defeat her without magic. But even with magic, she'd have to have the precise spell and would only get one chance. What spell could she cast, what sort of hex would defeat the Crimson Cowl?

It didn't matter. Her heart sank as she realized that even if she stopped this woman, knocked her out, bound her or took away her control of the cowl, the other Masters of Evil were still out there on the museum steps fighting with LAPD officers who might already be dying. Just beating the

Crimson Cowl or capturing her wouldn't solve that; it wouldn't make the cops and the Runaways safe.

Nico lunged for the staff.

The Crimson Cowl spun and the cowl lashed out. It wrapped around the Staff of One just as Nico's fingers closed on it. She stood, fighting the strength of the cowl for a moment.

"That's adorable," the Cowl said. "Is that some kind of weapon? Let me have a closer look."

The cowl yanked, reeling in the staff. Nico held on, even leaped toward the woman, letting the strength of the cowl give her speed. She twisted the staff and struck the Crimson Cowl in the face hard enough to stagger her. For a moment, her concentration broken, the cowl itself went limp and dragged around her like any ordinary cloak. It only lasted a moment, and then the cowl began to slither and reach for her again.

"Idiot," the Crimson Cowl said. "You really think you can —"

Nico gestured toward the glass box and the smooth black obelisk inside it. A spell rose to her lips, a flicker of inspiration, a solution.

*"To the Moon,"* she said, smiling happily.

It vanished. Glass box, ordinary chair, and monitor, and that five-foot piece of creepy tech. The Crimson Cowl spun and stared at the black stretch of floor where the object of her criminal desire had been sitting just a second before.

"How *dare* you!" the Cowl roared, and the cloak whipped toward her.

Nico held the staff in her left hand as she dove behind one of the transparent workboards scrawled with complex math. The cloak shattered it, as the Crimson Cowl marched after her.

"What did you do?"

"It's gone," Nico said. "Your boys are fighting fifty cops or more in the street out there. Whatever happens now,

whoever dies, it's for nothing. My friends have already reported that you're here, what you're up to, so the police will be coming. Every second you waste is a risk."

"You think I can't get to the moon?"

Nico smiled. "I think you can't get to the moon *and* search the entire surface for the Skeleton Key before—"

"Before what? Before *you* find it?"

"I'm not going to the damn moon," Nico scoffed. "But I *can* make an untraceable phone call to the people who own this building, let them know what happened. You know S.H.I.E.L.D. or S.W.O.R.D. or somebody will beat you there. You're done. Whatever you wanted that thing for, it's not gonna happen."

The Crimson Cowl pointed at her, and the cowl itself rose up to point, the fabric mimicking her hand. "I'll see you again."

Nico held the staff ready, wondering what desperate spell she'd manage next.

"I hope you're smarter by then—"

But Nico hadn't even finished the sentence when the cowl rose up, swirled around its owner, and the Crimson Cowl teleported from the room.

Nico felt the air go out of her like a popped balloon. She dropped to the floor and sat there, numb, thinking about how close she'd just come to death. Over her comms, her friends were cheering for her, telling her how much ass she kicked and how smart she'd been, but it didn't feel smart to her. It felt insane. Almost suicidal.

Then she heard Karolina's voice in her ear: "The fight's not over, Nico. Get out here."

She jumped up and started running for the elevator, wondering what she'd find when she reached the ground floor. She called their names—the names of the friends who'd become her family—asking them to tell her they were okay, that they were safe.

Nico didn't pray, but these felt like prayers.



They'd created this void in the L.A. underworld, this vacuum that so many blackhearted people were rushing to fill, and they wanted to take responsibility for it, to prevent the defeat of the Pride from making things worse. But for the first time, Nico admitted to herself that she didn't think they could do it alone, that this was too big for a bunch of practically homeless teenage runaways. This was too big for them.

A moment ago, she'd had a big personal win. So how come it felt so much like losing?



Karolina lay on the museum roof, looking down at the standoff between the cops and the Masters of Evil. Whirlwind had blown three police cars over and Blue Steel had nailed several officers with energy beams from his suit, but she noticed that the attacks weren't fatal. One of the cop cars had an officer inside and she hoped he was all right, but at the moment, her big concern was Sunstroke.

"Nico, whatever you're doing, please hurry," she said.

Molly shifted beside Karolina. The two of them were flat on their bellies, looking down from the roof.

"This doesn't feel very Super Hero—y," Molly grouched. "We should be down there—"

The police would be dealing with us *and* them. "We'd just make it worse if we couldn't shut them down."

"Who says we can't?" Molly said, wrinkling her nose. "I wanna win this thing before this power surge burns off and I pass out." She grabbed the edge of the roof and broke off a chunk of masonry, then leaned out to take aim at the criminals below.

"Molly, no. You could kill someone."

"So could they, if we don't do something."

Karolina knew she was right, but dropping a big piece of stone onto someone from a hundred feet overhead would be murder, not self-defense. Whirlwind and Blue Steel were pulling their punches, but Sunstroke kept swearing loudly and screaming at the police. Furious and cradling his broken arm, maybe humiliated at the way things had gone for him the past twenty-four hours, he kept generating waves of heat that baked the facade of the museum and made the skin on Karolina's face feel tight. The paint on the nearest police cars bubbled and blackened, so that the cops had been forced to retreat farther back. At first several had shot at him, but the bullets had melted before reaching him, and from the sound of things it seemed like Sunstroke might be about to reach his breaking point.

"Let me try," Karolina said. She dragged herself farther forward, but the edge of the roof seemed to yawn before her, to tug at her as if the air wanted her to fall. "Molly, sit on my legs."

Molly got it immediately. She scrambled back from the edge and straddled Karolina's thighs. The girl didn't weigh much, but it was enough to give Karolina the confidence to slide a few inches more, so that her head and arms were hanging out over the edge, only the museum steps far below to break her fall. Molly might be small, but she was strong. If Karolina started to fall, she could drag her back up. Although now that Karolina thought about it, she wondered how much of an anchor Molly would need. Without something to hold on to, might she not just tumble off the roof as well?

*You can fly, dummy,* she thought, smiling to herself. But even so, she felt the fear of falling, and this was about ending the standoff, not escalating things. Flying around above their heads would only antagonize the Masters of Evil.

"Okay," she said quietly, "I'm going to take out Whirlwind first. Without him, I think we can take the other two if we

have to.”

“Finally,” Molly huffed. “Do it.”

Karolina reached both arms down, letting them dangle, and clasped her hands together to form a finger-gun. Whirlwind must figure they were gone by now, so he wouldn't be expecting an aerial attack. She was only going to get one shot, which meant her aim had to be perfect.

Down on the steps, she could see his green helmet. His lower body was hidden inside a mini-tornado, but his upper body was visible, turned toward the police as Sunstroke raved. Taking aim with her fingers, swathes of rainbow light curling around her hands, Karolina shot a thin, barely visible beam of multicolored light down at Whirlwind. It struck his helmet, not hard enough to burn through but so hard that he jerked to one side and then tumbled down the stairs, the tornado around him dispersing instantly.

“Drag me back!” she called.

Molly obliged with a single tug, scraping Karolina's arms against the roof edge. Karolina sprang to her feet and swathes of light weaved around her, flowing from her body, turning her hair into something else...into pure light.

She reached for Molly. “Let's go.”

Holding Molly with one hand, she stepped off the roof, propelled by her solar radiation. She'd run out of stored power soon, but morning was not far off, and all of this would be over by then. Down below, Sunstroke roared and stormed over to Whirlwind, spun around in search of their unseen attackers, and finally looked up. Even from this height, Karolina could see his rage. More than that, she could feel it. Sunstroke raised his unbroken arm and a ball of fire blossomed around it, so hot that Blue Steel backed away from his teammate and shouted at him, his combat suit smoldering, smoke rising from his chest plate.

Karolina took a shot at him, but her attack went wide. Sunstroke roared and released a blast of fire that ballooned into the air. Molly shouted and twisted, and Karolina had to

use both hands to hold on to her as she flew around the side of the building to avoid the roiling cloud of fire. Gunshots rang out and as Karolina banked and returned, she and Molly saw Sunstroke jerk aside, struck by a bullet to the shoulder.

Blue Steel knelt by Whirlwind, trying to shake him awake. He lifted a hand and some kind of beam shot from it—not a weapon but a defensive shield, which deployed a crackling blue wall of flickering energy that would buy them time, if Karolina and Molly weren't coming in hard, just overhead.

"Ready?" she called to Molly.

"Ready!"

Karolina swooped lower. Fifty feet over Blue Steel's head, she released Molly's hands. The superstrong girl dropped like a bomb—

As she fell, the Crimson Cowl appeared beside Blue Steel and the unconscious Whirlwind. She scooped them both inside her cloak and they vanished in an instant. Molly landed hard enough to crack the stone steps, but they were gone. Karolina turned, worried that Sunstroke would attack now, even as the police moved in—a dozen of them, guns drawn, behind riot shields that might be fireproof but not against fire this hot.

The Crimson Cowl reappeared. As Karolina dove toward her, the woman's cloak enfolded Sunstroke and teleported him away as well.

On the broken steps, Molly fell to her knees and toppled over, fainting. She'd used her powers so much that she'd fallen completely unconscious. Police began shouting, but Karolina grabbed Molly, then let out a burst of vivid colors that would make the cops shield their eyes, at least for a moment. And a moment was long enough.

When the police looked again, the crisis had ended and everyone with powers had gone, leaving them standing in the glow of the sun peeking above the eastern horizon and looking forward to a long day full of paperwork.



Gert had a cold water bottle in her hand but she'd almost forgotten it was there. Zeke sat in the chair beside her, the two of them hanging out in front of the computer arrays in the cavern. They'd hit the galley kitchen next to the conference room and rustled up drinks and small bags of pretzels. Now Zeke sipped his soda and Gert tried not to fall asleep in the chair.

"Am I boring you?" Zeke asked.

Gert smiled thinly and pretended to prop up her eyelids with her free hand. "Not at all. I'm so tired I feel like a zombie. We can probably go to sleep now. The thing with the Crimson Cowl is over. They're coming back."

"What's the point in sleeping? You know they'll just wake you up when they get back. If the others don't, then I'm sure your boyfriend will."

Gert crossed her arms. "I guess he will."

"If you were my girlfriend, I'd let you sleep."

She stared at him. Zeke had big eyes, light brown that glittered with a frosted golden hue. *Beautiful*, Gert thought, surprising herself. But the observation was pure fact, and it wasn't just his eyes. He was the most gorgeous guy she'd been within a hundred yards of since her life had changed and school had become part of her past instead of the future. And now he...

"Are you flirting with me?" she asked, resisting the urge to adjust her purple hair.

Zeke opened a little bag of pretzels, ignoring the question. He took a few and then offered her the bag. Gert dug her fingers in and took several, popping one into her mouth. The salt helped revive her.

"Our friend Alex's dad loved pretzels," she said. "I'm sure that's why they were stocked in there."

"I'm a cheesy puffs kinda guy," Zeke said. "But pretzels will do when it's dawn and you've been up all night."

"It's just weird," Gert replied, ignoring the pretzels now. She didn't want any more. Even the water bottle seemed something foreign to her. "Thinking of Alex's dad—"

"This is Alex Wilder?"

"Yeah. And Mr. Wilder—Super Villain Mr. Wilder, leader of the Pride—loved pretzels. And Dr Pepper. What a strange thing to remember."

"It makes him seem so normal," Zeke said sadly.

"That's exactly what I was thinking. It's so normal. Dr Pepper and pretzels. He probably liked bad sitcoms. When I think about my parents, it makes it easier to think of them as these time-traveling sort of sinister characters, like them being my parents was just a kind of masquerade. Roles they were playing. Like underneath the masks they wore when they were pretending to be my parents they were man-eating insect monsters."

"Something really *other*," Zeke said.

Gert froze. Her throat tightened and she bit her lip a little, hoping the tiny bit of moisture in her eyes wouldn't turn into something else. "Yeah. That's exactly it. I want to think of them as *other*. As alien, and not in the way Karolina's parents were aliens."

"That's how I feel about my mom," Zeke said quietly. The air in the cavern seemed to grow warm and still, and he glanced away as if he didn't want to meet her eyes. "My mother...I want to think she wouldn't have killed me herself, but I have no doubt in my mind at all that she would have let the others kill me. I'm not even sure if Tess and Carlos are alive. I'm just hoping. It's easier to think she changed, that she wasn't always this horrible thing, but I guess she was."

Zeke put his soda on the counter in front of the computer array. Gert set her water down. Here it was again, the real Zeke, the authentic, vulnerable human inside the

swaggering ego. She wanted to comfort him, even thought of taking his hand, but she knew it would be wrong, so she kept her hands to herself.

"Is it horrible for me to say that I'm glad we're not alone in this?" Gert asked.

Zeke frowned. "In what?"

"In this." She threw her arms out, gesturing to include the whole base. "My friends and me. It's just always seemed like some kind of awful joke on us. No, not a joke...a curse, like somehow we were all being punished for something we could never have controlled. Like, who does that? What kind of losers do we have to be to have parents who turn out to be the worst human beings on earth?"

Zeke glanced at his feet. "I kind of think every teenager in the world hits a point when they realize their parents aren't the people they thought."

Gert laughed. "This is a little different, don't you think? It's not like finding out your mom had an affair or your dad drinks too much."

"Totally different," Zeke agreed, "but just in degrees, right? Or at least that's what I keep telling myself. Everybody wears one mask or another."

Gert stole his pretzels. She'd changed her mind. "I'm not wearing a mask, Zeke. I'm exactly who I seem to be."

Zeke watched her. He picked up his soda can and took a sip. "I think you're lying. I think you're a lot more complicated than you seem to be on the surface."

"Hey—"

"All I'm saying is that nobody's ever just one thing. We make things simple—our choices, our relationships—because it's easier on us and the people around us. But inside nothing's black-and-white."

Gert rolled that over in her head, staring at him.

Zeke slid his chair a little closer, until their knees were touching. He rested his soda can on her left knee. "And to answer your question, yes...I was flirting with you."

The sound of some pretty obvious throat-clearing interrupted them, and Gert glanced around to see that Allis had entered the cavern. The girl had tugged her bloodstained pants back on and had dragged her hair into a ponytail. She looked pale and tired but also deeply irritated.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting," Allis said.

Gert slid away from Zeke. She picked up her water bottle and fiddled with it. "Zeke couldn't sleep. He set off the motion sensors in the corridor and...well, I shut them off as fast as I could. You didn't get up right away so I sorta hoped I'd silenced them fast enough that you hadn't been woken up."

Allis put on a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Yeah, I can see you were hoping not to be disturbed."

"That's not what I'm..." Gert sighed, a little flustered. For a few seconds she forced a smile, but then she let it fade. Forcing a smile to make someone else feel better had never been one of her talents, but she figured you had to give a damn about other people's comfort before you could hone that skill.

"You do remember that we saved your life, right?" Gert asked instead.

Allis narrowed her eyes and for a second Gert thought she was going to say something else about her and Zeke, but then the girl rolled her eyes and lifted a hand as if waving the moment away. "Sorry. I'm not trying to give you a hard time. It's just that I was lying there forever trying to get back to sleep after that alarm went off—and why the hell did you need that to begin with? A motion sensor? Are we supposed to be prisoners?"

"Of course not," Gert said quickly, on the defensive now. "It's nothing like that. We didn't even...it's something the Pride set up. We just moved in here last night, remember?"

Allis studied her. Gert wondered if the girl could tell she was lying.



Zeke stood up and clapped his hands together. "Look, I don't know about you two, but I'm starving. Let's find the actual kitchen in this place and see if we can make some actual breakfast. Pretzels ain't doing it."

He set off in search of food. Gert looked at Allis for a few seconds, wondering if she should apologize, and wondering if maybe the caustic, irritated girl of a few moments ago was what Allis looked like when her own mask came off.

*Not that you can fault her*, Gert thought. Zeke had been right. Everyone wears a mask at some point or another, and they were all tired and hungry and afraid.

"Come on, Allis," she said. "Zeke's right. Let's get some food. Everything's going to get better once the sun comes up. It always does."

Another lie. A new dawn might make things seem better, but it never cures anything.

Lying seemed to be coming easy to her this morning. But why not? After all, she'd been raised on lies.



## NINE

**M**any hours later, Chase woke to find Gert kissing his neck. He felt her warm breath on his skin, the gentle touch of her lips, and his eyes opened slowly. It had been after dawn when he, Nico, Karolina, and Molly had returned, and Gert had kissed him the moment he'd climbed out of the *Leapfrog*. She'd been worried about him, she said, and at first he'd thought she was kidding around. Gert had never been the clingy type—in fact, half the time she wanted nothing to do with him, boyfriend or not. But after they'd all agreed to get some sleep and talk about the night's events when they were more capable of stringing words into sentences, Gert had walked Chase back to the room he'd picked out for himself and she'd never left.

Nothing had happened. They'd both been exhausted and she'd climbed into bed with him, curled up into his arms, and fallen dead asleep.

*Correction*, Chase thought. *Nothing happened* last night.

This morning, something was very definitely happening. Gert turned his face toward hers and kissed him. Without

her glasses on, she barely looked like herself, as if they were some kind of wall that usually shielded her from revealing too much of herself. Under the covers, her right hand traced lines down his chest and toyed with the waistband of his boxer briefs, exploring.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Gert—”

She kissed him again, almost as if she just wanted to shut him up. Chase didn’t argue. The kissing was nice, and so was the way her hand kept exploring. She kissed his neck again.

Her right leg slid over his thigh, bare and smooth, and she snuggled closer against him, soft skin on soft skin. Chase’s eyes went wide and his breath hitched. He slid an inch or two away from her under the covers.

“Wait, are you naked?”

She flinched, green eyes pinched with hurt. “Is that bad?”

Chase felt blood rushing through him, like his whole body was blushing. His breath quickened and he kissed her, turning toward her under the sheets. It felt as if his brain split in two, like part of him—the lizard, id part—was all body, all flesh, and the other part, the guy who’d always felt like an outsider, abnormal and weird, someone who’d end up a forty-year-old virgin—that part had a thousand questions. He quelled those questions, quieted the hesitant voice in the back of his head, because Gert Yorkes, the girl he loved, was there in bed with him, kissing him, soft and naked and pressed against him and her hand kept moving. He touched her in ways he’d been dreaming about day and night, and though she trembled and a little noise escaped her lips, there was something else that even the lizard part of his brain noticed, a stiffness in her, a tension in her body that didn’t seem like passion at all. Not that he had a lot of experience with passion, but still, this wasn’t it.

Heart pounding, throat dry, he managed to push himself back from her, the lizard brain part of him telling him that he was the stupidest guy on earth, that when you were a virgin and your brilliant, cautious, beautiful, body-shy girlfriend decided now was the time, then *now was the damn time!*

But he loved her. And he could see something wasn't right.

"What is it?"

She ignored him, moved in to kiss him again, but Chase drew back.

"Gert, stop."

"Are you serious?" She looked stricken and pale. "I mean, this is what you want."

Chase shifted away from her and sat up in bed. The sheet fell off him. Self-conscious now, Gert gathered it around her throat to keep from exposing herself.

"Hey—" he began.

"Are you saying you don't? You're always saying you don't want to die a virgin—"

"And I don't! Jeez, do you?"

"Obviously not."

Chase shook his head. "No. There's something else going on here. I know everything's up in the air. We had to run again yesterday and now we're somewhere new. Is it because you stayed behind? Were you—wait, were you afraid something would happen to everyone and you'd be alone?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, now you're psychoanalyzing me?"

Chase stared at her. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened between yesterday and today that made you decide now was the time for us to do it."

"'Do it.' Such a romantic."

"Hey. Don't do that. Don't be mean just to piss me off so we'll fight and move off topic."

"I don't do that," Gert protested.

"You *so* do."

Gert sighed. She sat up, surrendering her grip on the sheets, which slipped down to pool around her waist.

"Well, those are definitely a better distraction," he admitted.

Gert punched him in the shoulder, which was how he knew she was more herself.

"Ow," Chase said.

She smiled weakly. "You know you'll kick yourself later. You just had your chance."

"I hope it's not my only chance. And by the way, it was your chance, too."

Gert nodded, smile vanishing. "I just...yeah, I'm scared about the future, okay? I don't like...unveiling myself, or whatever. We're together right now—you and me on the one hand, and the whole group of us on the other. We're together. We're family. But every day we make a choice to stay together, even with all we've been through—"

"*Because* of what we've been through."

"—but I worry about what happens to us next. Chase, there *is* going to be a next. Maybe not today or even this year, but next, at some point, is coming. Sometimes I wonder if we've done the right thing, staying together like this."

"Wait," Chase said. "You mean *us-us*, or the *Runaways-us*?"

"All of us. I feel like trouble finds us faster when we're together, that it puts us in more danger, and I know it's not what's best for Molly."

"I disagree," he said quickly. "Molly's crazy strong. Mini-Hulk strong. She's a mutant. If she wasn't with us, eventually the wrong person would figure out what she is and then she's not in foster care, she's in some mutant research facility or whatever. Is that what you want for her?"

Gert pressed the heels of her hands over her eyes. "Of course not. And you're right. I know that. It's just...a lot of responsibility."

"We're responsible for each other," he agreed. "That's the best part of being together, looking out for each other."

Gert took his hand. "But we're also responsible *to* each other, don't you think?"

Chase looked at her. "I don't know. I mean, we all have our own choices to make. I really hope you don't decide you'd rather be in some foster home than here with us, and I'd try to talk you out of it, and I guess it wouldn't be that long before you turned eighteen anyway, but...Wait, you're not going to leave, are you?"

Suddenly it seemed like a real possibility and he panicked.

"No. I'm not leaving."

"Then what are we talking about?"

Gert slid out of bed, taking the covers with her. She wrapped herself in them, taking a few steps away from the bed. The lamps were all off but the room had dim, recessed lighting that threw a soft glow along the edge of the ceiling, and it made Gert look almost like a statue, backlit and perfectly carved in all of her short, shapely glory. Sadness radiated off her.

"Please tell me," he said.

Exhaling sharply, she snatched her clothes off the floor and held them against her, bunched with the sheet and blanket. "Zeke woke up while you guys were gone last night. This morning. Whatever. He was flirting with me."

Chase went cold inside, but he forced himself to keep his composure. Zeke had rubbed him the wrong way from the start, but he hadn't expected this. "That's a dick move, considering he knows you have a boyfriend, but I'm not exactly surprised. Some guys are like that. Who wouldn't be tempted to flirt with you?"

Gert scowled. "Don't. I know I'm not pretty—"

"You are."

"I'm short and fat—"

"Gert."

"—and I don't try to make myself more pleasant just to make other people happy."

"All reasons why I love you."

Gert shot him a hard look. "That's kind of missing the point, isn't it?"

"Okay, all reasons I *admire* you. Both things are true."

Chase felt sick to his stomach. He had a question he wished he could ask, but he didn't dare. Gert answered it without him asking.

"Nothing happened," she said. "Just the flirting."

His parents might have been geniuses, and maybe that had always made him feel stupid, but there were things about which Chase Stein had never been dumb. Understanding dawned on him.

"You flirted back. That's what this was about." He glanced around the room as if he could find answers somewhere other than her eyes. "You feel guilty, and you thought if you...if we...Damn it, Gert. Do you really think I'd want the first time we had sex to be because you felt guilty? Do you want that?"

"No! And it wasn't just that. I just—I felt really far away from you last night. It's why I wanted to stay in here with you. And this morning, watching you sleep...I just wanted to be closer to you."

Chase lowered his head, put both hands on the back of his neck, and just tried to breathe. His body still felt exhausted from the marathon of lunacy and violence they'd endured the day before, and the electric thrill of arousal still clouded his thoughts. How was he supposed to make sense of this? Should he be furious? Would Gert want him to be jealous—Well, he was definitely jealous, but did she need him to fight for her? He had a kind of caveman brain

sometimes, but he'd always thought she was above that kind of thing, too smart to play games.

"You don't even know him," he said. "The guy's a stranger."

"Chase..." she began.

"He is good-looking," Chase admitted.

"Nothing happened," she said again.

Something about her tone made him narrow his eyes and look up at her. In the moments his thoughts had wandered she'd dropped the sheet and blanket and pulled on her underwear and bra. Now she tugged on her shirt and picked her pants up off the ground.

"Nothing happened," he echoed.

"I swear."

"Gert," he said, sliding to the edge of the bed, sitting there and staring at her. "Did you *want* something to happen?"

She turned away, hurried to the door and opened it, then glanced back at him.

"I honestly don't know," she said. "I swear to God, I don't know."

Then Gert stepped out and closed the door behind her, leaving Chase to ponder.

He hadn't been sitting there three minutes before he got up and went into the bathroom to shower. His whole life, his parents had verbally and emotionally abused him. More than once, his father had taught him a lesson that left bruises. He'd felt *less than*, ever since he could think at all. Having these friends, having Gert's love, these were the first things that had made him believe he was worth something. Gert could make up her own mind about the kind of life she wanted and who she wanted to be with, but Chase knew what and who he wanted, and intended to make that crystal clear.





Karolina knocked softly. She glanced up and down the corridor, wondering if she'd come to the right door. The new Hostel was bigger than she'd first imagined, with what seemed to be a little wing for each of the six families that had once made up the Pride. None of the others had mentioned it, but Karolina felt pretty sure that's what it was. Her parents had a wing to themselves, with three bedrooms, each with a private bath, all elegantly appointed. Each wing seemed to have its own character, and she was observant enough that she thought she'd identified the four she had wandered into thus far. Some had living rooms, others libraries, one—the Minorus', she thought—a music room. On a lower level, below all of the living quarters and the main cavern, down circular staircases but also accessible via elevator, was another level comprised of a large dining area, a gym, and a kitchen worthy of a five-star resort. Still deeper there were laboratories, but Karolina didn't want to go down there. Not ever.

The corridor in which she stood—the one she'd identified as likely belonging to the Steins, based on the Spartan decoration and the way the lighting faded in and out as she'd walked down the hall—remained quiet. Had she gotten it right? Had Allis actually been in the Wilders' wing? Now that she'd gotten some sleep, though it was late afternoon, the previous day and night seemed like a half-remembered dream.

She knocked again, glancing at her surroundings and pondering the idea that their parents had made room for them here. When the Pride had made their original pact with the Gibborim, those Elder Gods of the Earth had promised them six places in the paradise to come when they ruled and the rest of humanity was destroyed. The members of the Pride had been competing for those six places, and then

Janet Stein had gotten pregnant with Chase and everything had changed. The six couples had agreed to set aside their conflicts. Each of them would have one child, and that child would receive their place in the Gibborim's promised paradise to carry on the legacy of the Pride.

It hadn't worked out that way. Not even close. But here she stood in a wing of this base that was clearly made to house not just one of the couples from the Pride, but their offspring as well, and a servant or two. Her skin crawled in revulsion at the idea that these people—two of them her own parents—had truly believed that once they'd deigned to reveal the truth to their children, the kids would have gone along with it. The thought chilled her, and forced her to wonder. Had they had a plan? Did they have reason to believe such a thing, or was it just hubris? Worst of all, she wondered what would have happened if they'd each been told the truth at eighteen or twenty-one or whatever age their parents found fitting. Would any of the Pride have been able to present that truth in such a way that their child would have bought into it?

Karolina rested her forehead against the door, enjoying the cool, smooth surface. They'd gotten lucky last night, she knew that. The Runaways weren't cut out for the Super Hero business. They were supposed to take care of one another and watch over other street kids, and that was good and noble, but there had to be something afterward. The others didn't talk about it, but Karolina felt certain that some of them must be thinking about it, especially Nico. She could practically see the thoughts constantly swirling behind Nico's eyes. That ambition, the yearning for more out of her life, was one of the things that made Nico so beautiful and made them all turn to her for leadership. To her, this new Hostel wasn't a solution—even a temporary one. It was the next place for them to squat while they ticked off the days until they were old enough to make their way in the world. Karolina felt this keenly, but Molly was too young, and Chase

and Gert seemed not only content to keep things as they were, but fiercely determined to do so. Karolina loved them all. They were her family. But just like in any family outside of never-never land, someday the kids had to grow up.

Hinges creaked. A quiet voice said her name. Karolina turned to see that she'd been in the right corridor but at the wrong door. Allis stood framed in the bedroom doorway across the hall wearing nothing but a T-shirt and underpants. She had her arms folded across her chest and she glanced along the hallway as if she feared Old Lace might suddenly appear to eat her.

"Hi," Karolina said. "I guess I had the wrong door. Did I wake you?"

Allis took a step backward into her room. "I've been awake for at least an hour. I didn't want to set off the alarm."

A twinge of guilt made Karolina move toward her. "I'm sorry about that. It's not...The sensors are off right now. The others are up making...well, it's after lunchtime, so I guess we can't call it breakfast, but they're in the kitchen making food. Do you want to put some clothes on and we can go get something?"

Allis gave a quick nod. "Come on in."

Karolina did so. The bed had been made so perfectly it looked unslept-in, and her clothes had been piled on a skinny chair of aluminum and black faux-leather. Allis pulled off the T-shirt and Karolina caught a glimpse that made her blush before she glanced away. More concerned with Allis's privacy than Allis herself was, she shut the bedroom door. The girl climbed into her clothes, but as she dragged her own shirt back on, Karolina saw her begin to shudder. Allis hugged herself, back still turned as she sniffed and then swiped at her eyes.

"Hey," Karolina said softly, hating that she was crying. "You're okay."

"Am I?" Allis asked, an edge to her voice.

“We’ve all felt what you’re feeling. I know how cast adrift you feel. But you’re safe and you’re alive. We can figure out the rest.”

Allis still didn’t turn around. “You had them. Your friends. You weren’t alone. And they had you.”

Karolina touched her arm. “Allis, you’ve got me, too. I’m not just going to let you go back to—”

Now she turned, shuddering as she hugged Karolina. “You don’t get it. I need to go. I’ve got to get out of here. This is all...it’s crazy. Maybe you’re used to this stuff, weird cults and super powers and dinosaurs, but I’m just me. I don’t belong here.”

“You don’t belong on the street, either,” Karolina said, holding on to the shorter girl. “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know,” Allis said, her breath warm at Karolina’s ear. “I’ve been thinking about it. I have a cousin who goes to college in Atlanta. She might let me crash—she was always nice to me when I was little—but I haven’t been able to find her on social media and I don’t know how else to get in touch with her.”

Her body shook. Karolina took half a step back and saw the tears on Allis’s cheeks, saw the deep sadness of this lost and lonely girl. She held Allis’s face in her hands and started wiping the tears away.

“We’ll help you find her. I know it’s crazy with us. I know you must be afraid. Sometimes I forget what it’s like to live in the normal world, but I promise you’re safer with us than you are out there alone. Please let me—”

Allis kissed her. It happened fast. One second Karolina was talking, wiping away those tears, and the next the girl’s lips were on hers and her heart jumped. She flinched backward, but only a little. The kiss started rough and urgent, searching for contact, but it turned softer, lingering, with little breaths stolen between them. Karolina knew she ought to pull away, but Allis had risen adorably on her

tiptoes and their bodies pressed together and the kiss deepened.

It was Allis who broke off. They stayed in an embrace, but Allis tilted her head back to look up at Karolina, wary and hesitant.

"I just totally went for it. I didn't know if you were thinking—"

"I wasn't, but—"

"Oh, God. That's embarrassing." Allis pulled back a little further.

"—it's definitely okay. More than okay."

"I've been dying to kiss you. I wanted to run, just wanted to get the hell out of here, but I kept thinking if I just took off I'd never have the chance to kiss you."

Karolina felt her pulse throbbing in her lips, like her heart lived in her mouth now. "I'm glad you stayed."

"You're not shocked?"

A smirk touched the edges of Karolina's lips and she bent to kiss Allis again. She took her time, brushing the other girl's mouth with hers, then kissed her on the tip of the nose.

"Does that seem 'shocked' to you?" she said.

Allis smiled, her body relaxing a bit. "I'm going to say no. But don't pretend it wasn't a roll of the dice for me. Most girls don't welcome random kissing from other girls."

"You're not the first girl I've kissed," Karolina said, although this sounded worldlier and more cavalier than she felt. Though she'd had a crush on a boy in the fifth grade, she'd pretty much known she preferred girls since the age of thirteen, when her best friend Lyla Sweeney had kissed her during a sleepover. She'd never gotten around to telling her parents or even saying it out loud, but they'd been actors living in L.A., so in their household being gay was sort of like preferring strawberry ice cream over chocolate. When she'd found out her parents weren't from Earth—that she herself was an alien—the only thing that made it possible

for her to deal with that news without shattering was the fact that being different was not new to her.

“Maybe I’m safer here after all,” Allis said, and she kissed Karolina again.

When Allis nudged her toward the bed, Karolina went happily.



Nico had never been at home in a kitchen. Sure, she could make scrambled eggs, but the dumbest monkey on Earth could make scrambled eggs. The trouble was that Zeke was there watching her, and he had that hair—half shaved, half a raggedy mess. Nico had mastered the tough-chick aura and the laid-back goth indifference, but certain parts of her still perked up around boys as hot as this one. It irritated the hell out of her.

“What are you making?” he asked, pushing himself up to sit on top of the enormous metal cutting table in the center of the Hostel’s gourmet kitchen.

“Nothing special. Western omelet.”

“Can I have one?”

“Can you make one?”

Zeke sulked. “Possibly.”

Nico smiled—which pissed her off. “Don’t be a baby. I’ll make you one.”

“And me!” Molly piped up, marching back into the kitchen.

In the corner of the kitchen there was a cooler full of frozen meats and other foodstuffs. Molly had been playing with Old Lace when Nico had first woken up. She’d given the dinosaur a box of chocolate chip cookies, which Old Lace had scarfed down instantly, but she’d left the room to get a damp towel to clean up the dinosaur’s face, mostly to hide the evidence. Gert didn’t like when they fed Old Lace sugary

stuff, but Molly couldn't help giving the dino a treat now and again, and Nico wasn't going to rat her out. Except that Molly leaving the room had given Nico and Zeke a few minutes alone—long enough for him to plant unwelcome ideas in her head.

*They are unwelcome, right?* she thought. The truth was that she wasn't sure.

Old Lace had decided that she didn't like Zeke at all. She'd been huffing at him and hissing, so now—while Nico cooked and snuck glances at Zeke—Molly went into the freezer to find something else to occupy her dino-brain. She emerged in the midst of unwrapping a frozen steak and studied it dubiously.

"Do you think she can eat it like this? Like a steak-sicle?"

Before Nico could reply, Old Lace snatched the frozen steak in her jaws and turned toward the freezer door as if to block them from attempting to retrieve it. The sounds of her slobbering and gnawing at the steak were all the answer any of them needed.

"Okay then," Molly said. She clapped her hands together. "So...western omelets? What the heck's a western omelet?"

Gert came into the kitchen and glanced around, eyes wide behind her glasses. "Wow. This is beautiful. Those Italian tiles...The kitchen is the nicest room in the place."

"I blame my dad," Molly said.

"Oh, yeah," Gert said. "I remember you said he loved to cook."

Nico blinked. Gert looked like she'd just rolled out of bed. Worse than that, actually. Her hair was a purple mess, a single clip holding a chunk of it up out of her face. Her makeup from the night before had smeared but she hadn't washed any of it off. She was clearly unshowered and wore an oversize T-shirt and baggy sweatpants with a stain on the front and a sag in the rear. Gert had never been overly concerned about her appearance. This, though—what the hell was this?

"Do you...Do you want an omelet?" Nico asked her.

Gert went to the fridge and started rooting around inside it. "That's really nice of you, Nico. I'd love one."

She pulled out a bottle of orange juice. Nico thought it must have gone bad after sitting in there for who-knew-how-long, but Gert spun off the cap and took a long drink right from the bottle.

"Are you feeling okay?" Nico asked.

Gert covered the juice and put it back, letting the fridge door slam. "Sure. Why?"

Nico shrugged and went back to chopping vegetables for the omelets she was making. She'd already whisked the eggs but wondered if she needed to do it again. Her thoughts focused on the task at hand, half-distracted by Old Lace gnawing on the frozen steak in the corner and Molly holding her nose and complaining about dinosaur farts, she almost missed the disappointed, almost forlorn look that Zeke gave Gert.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Good morning."

Gert ignored him, moving across the huge kitchen toward Old Lace and Molly. "You know, this isn't really healthy for her. She needs more vegetables in her diet."

"You feed her vegetables all the time," Molly said with a pout. "She needs a treat sometimes. It's not like I gave her ice cream."

"Not this time," Gert said.

Nico watched Zeke approach her, watched him shift from foot to foot and scratch the back of his head as if he was trying to figure out what he wanted to do. *No way*, Nico thought. *Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?*

"Hey, Gert?" Zeke began. "Do you think we could talk for a second?"

Gert barely looked up. Her response was a single word. "Why?"

Zeke stared at her, stumped by the question. "I just thought...I thought..." He shook his head. "Okay. Never



mind, I guess.”

With a last glance, he wandered back over to the enormous metal prep surface in the middle of the kitchen. “Can I help?”

Nico arched an eyebrow. “Nope. I’ve got it, thanks,” she said, enjoying his awkwardness.

She didn’t know what had happened between Gert and Zeke last night, but clearly something must have taken place for Gert to be giving him such an icy reception this morning. And Gert showing up looking the way she did suggested she didn’t want to encourage any interest he might have, which made Nico’s head whirl.

Zeke thought he was some kind of player, hitting on Gert and then waking up and flirting with Nico. She’d known guys like that before. As cocky as Zeke was, she shouldn’t have been surprised. But, really? Gert? She hated how uncharitable, and how conceited, her thoughts were, but she was used to being the one guys paid attention to. Yeah, Karolina might be more traditionally beautiful, with her long legs and supermodel face, but she was open and joyful, and to most guys they encountered that made her somehow less interesting in spite of her looks. Nico had grown used to guys finding her intriguing. It wasn’t the reason she dressed the way she did, or the reason for the aloof distance she sometimes adopted around people, but if she were under oath, she’d have been forced to admit it was a happy by-product. Guys liked her. They tried to impress her. They did not typically fall over themselves trying to impress Gert.

*Good for her, Nico. Don’t be a bitch. Gert can use the ego boost.*

Nico put a little oil in the omelet pan and began to whisk the eggs again. “So,” she said to Zeke, “we should talk about what’s next. You want to rescue your friends from your parents. I assume we’re not going to be able to slip in unnoticed, snatch them, and run away.”

“Actually, I’m hoping that’s exactly what we can do,” Zeke replied.

“Great. You keep hoping,” Nico said. “But we need to prep for things to go horribly wrong. We need a real plan here, and we might need to recruit some help.”

Zeke grinned, pointing to himself. “I’m right here.”

“No offense, but you’re one guy, and unless you have powers you haven’t mentioned—”

“It never came up, but yeah. Obviously I have powers. Our parents are the Nightwatch. We’ve all got powers—me, Tess, and Carlos. Though mine are by far the coolest.” Zeke executed a little bow, as if he heard applause from some invisible audience. “I mean, if you’d even call what I do ‘having powers.’ It’s really an ability. Just one.”

“If you say ‘awesomeness’ or something about charming girls out of their pants, I will turn you into a friggin’ newt,” Nico promised.

By now, Zeke had the attention of the others. Molly and Gert had stopped what they were doing and focused on him. Old Lace whined because she wanted their attention, but they were all looking at Zeke now.

“Okay,” Nico said. “So what is it?”

“Is it cool?” Molly asked. “I bet it’s something cool.”

Zeke straightened up. His expression turned serious but there was mischief in his eyes. “I’ll show you. But don’t be afraid, okay? Nobody freak out.”

“We’re not going to be afraid,” Nico scoffed.

Zeke shrugged. He closed his eyes, hung his head, and muttered something Nico couldn’t hear, a guttural word or phrase that sounded nothing like English. There came a noise—a wet sort of pop—and abruptly Zeke vanished. In his place stood a fourteen-foot horned giant, a stinking, sweating thing with skin like wine-red leather.

“Holy—” Nico shouted, jumping backward. She grabbed the heated pan off the stove to defend herself.

Old Lace snapped and hissed and lunged for the giant, but Gert grabbed her around the neck and held her back, soothing her. Molly stepped in front of both of them, fists bunched, ready for a fight.



**T**he giant stooped over but its horns still scraped the ceiling. It carried a blood-crust-ed battle-ax in one hand. In the center of its forehead was what appeared to once have been a third eye, though at some point that eye had been sewn shut with thick black twine and now leaked yellowish tears. The other eyes, though—those eyes were on Nico.

“I did warn you,” the giant said with Zeke’s voice.

“Look at his hands,” Molly said. “Six fingers.”

“Gibborim,” Gert said. “Somehow he’s—”

“No,” the giant rumbled, still Zeke’s voice but as if two people were talking, one of them huge and ancient. “I told you about the Kurdogrim. My mother made a pact with them when she got pregnant with me. When I turned twelve she showed me how to do it, gave me the words the Kurdogrim gave to her. They’re still in their weird limbo, but I can swap bodies with one of them. Once or twice I’ve actually gone physically—swapped places with the Kurdogrim—but that’s dangerous, since it brings one of them into our world while I’m over there. Much better to body-switch. My mind,

monster flesh. Giant ax. Tess always calls this body 'Kurdo-Zeke.'"

Nico stared at the monstrous thing, at the ax in its hand and the scars on its wine-red hide, at the thick iron ring through its nose, and tried to make sense of Zeke's voice coming out of that ancient, terrifying body.

"Your mind stays here," she said. "Which means that wherever that Kurdogrim is, it's in control of your body right now?"

The giant Zeke pointed the ax at her. "You got it."

Gert visibly shuddered. "That's—"

Molly did a fist-pump. "*So freakin' cool!*"

Kurdo-Zeke turned to glance at her, still bent over. "Right?"

Before Nico could say another word, Chase wandered into the room, tugging a sweatshirt over his head. His face was lost inside the hoodie and he seemed to be having trouble finding the hole for his head.

"Guys," he said, voice muffled inside the sweatshirt. "What is that smell? I mean, no offense to whoever's cooking, but it smells like sweaty elephant ass in here."

Gert started to say his name, but then he found the head-hole in his hoodie and his face popped through. He shouted, started swearing, and immediately ran for Gert and Molly. Eyes wide, he reached out toward a knife rack as he passed and slipped out a massive butcher knife. He skidded into place and spun, still swearing at the giant, glancing around at them like they were crazy for just standing there.

"What are you doing?" he barked. "We've gotta—"

"Chase!" Nico snapped. She'd been saying his name over and over but he didn't listen until she shouted at him.

"It's one of the Gibborim!" he shouted back. "One we haven't seen—"

"No," Nico said. "It's a Kurdogrim."

“What the hell difference does that make?” he snapped, moving in with the knife, ready to die.

The giant Zeke crouched and stared at him. “Dude,” he said in that rumbling version of Zeke’s voice. “Do you not see the blood on this huge frickin’ ax? You really think that knife is gonna be the thing that takes me down?”

Chase stared, open-mouthed. “Is that...”

“Zeke,” Nico confirmed. “Yes.”

Chase began to laugh. Sighing, snickering, he shook his head and turned around, walking back the way he’d come.

Gert started to explain. “He can swap bodies with—”

“Yeah. I don’t really care,” Chase said. He put the knife back where he’d gotten it and went to the kitchen door before he turned to gaze in amazement at the crouching, horned giant. “I figured I could deal with it.” He started laughing again. “I guess that’s never gonna happen.”

“Chase—” Gert said.

“I’m going to finish repairing the *Leapfrog*,” he replied, turning to Nico. “I assume you’re working on a plan to save Tess and Carlos.”

“Yes.”

Chase nodded, then pointed at Zeke. “He’s not going to fit on board the *Frog* like that.”

“I can change back,” Zeke replied. “It’s not...I mean, it’s not difficult or anything.”

Chase gave him a look dripping with sarcasm. “Good for you.”

Then he left.

Awkwardness filled the kitchen. Zeke growled some words and with that same, damp popping noise, he was himself again. He stuck his hands in his pockets, looking like he wished he could be anywhere else. Nico stood there with the cooling frying pan dangling at her side. A little flame still flickered on top of the stove. The smell of the Kurdogrim had gotten into her nose and mouth, spoiling her appetite, but she glanced around at the others.

“Who wants my omelet?”

Gert started laughing then. When Molly joined in, so did Nico and Zeke. After a moment, Old Lace sniffed and scratched the floor, irritated that nobody was paying attention to her.

Nico went back to cooking. She made western omelets for everyone except Karolina, who was vegan. She turned out to be the lucky one, since Nico burned them all, and she'd used way too much salt. Whatever magic she had, it did not extend to the making of omelets.



The plan turned out to be more of an inclination. Hours after the scene in the kitchen, they'd gathered in the conference room again and Nico outlined everything she'd learned from a long conversation with Zeke. The Nightwatch was staying at the Trumbull Bel Air, a classic hotel from the early days of Hollywood that had enjoyed a resurgence of popularity. It was the sort of place that producers and stars had gathered for daytime meetings in the 1940s, drinking gin and tonics around the courtyard pool while the staff scurried back and forth, hoping to get noticed. To be discovered.

Gert had always loved old Hollywood. The movies, the culture, the fairy tale image of the place, so seeing the inside of the Trumbull held a certain interest. But it all rang false to her.

“Are we seriously thinking the Nightwatch is keeping prisoners—or hostages, or whatever—inside their hotel rooms?” Gert asked. “That’s just dumb.”

Chase pointed toward her. “Thank you. If they’re trying to take over where the Pride left off, they’d need some kind of secret base. They wouldn’t be staying in some hotel, and they wouldn’t keep whatever-their-names-are—”

“Tess and Carlos,” Zeke said, visibly irritated.

“Yes,” Chase agreed. “Them. What if they escaped and told people? All it takes is for one person passing in the hall to hear a noise or a maid to ignore the Do Not Disturb sign or whatever—”

Zeke leaned over the table. “You know, if you’d let Nico finish you’d know the answers and you wouldn’t be wasting all this time.”

Gert glared at him, but in the back of her mind she knew that her tension came partly from the night before. Flirting with him had been her own choice, but he’d known she had a boyfriend, so she felt angry and guilty in equal measure, and it was fueling her impatience with him now. She took a deep breath and forced herself to be objective, or at least to try.

“Nico?” she said.

“The answer’s pretty easy,” Nico replied. She glanced around at the others—Molly, Karolina, Chase...even Allis was in the room, because whatever they decided now affected her as well. “The Nightwatch own the Trumbull Bel Air. They bought it years ago and have been using it as a base since then, through its redesign and return to popularity. The staff are mostly operatives they were using to keep tabs on the Pride. When our parents died, they started making the plans they’re executing now.”

“So the hotel is their base,” Karolina said. She glanced at Zeke. “Any idea where they’d be keeping Carlos and Tess locked up?”

“I bet it’s the basement,” Molly said. “It’s always the basement.”

“Actually, it’s not,” Zeke said. “The basement would be easier. There’s a parking garage underneath the hotel with a special loading dock—a delivery entrance. If they were in the basement we could probably get in and out before anyone could stop us. But like I told Nico, the top two floors are the VIP suites, which sounds swanky—and it is, but it’s also the highest security. There are ‘safe rooms’ that are



really more like inescapable prison cells with unbreakable doors—”

“Nothing’s unbreakable,” Chase said. “Not really.”

“Thor’s hammer, hello?” Molly said derisively.

“Anything can be broken,” Chase told her. “Everything has a flaw, even things that are supposed to be flawless. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Which we don’t have,” Gert said.

Nico placed her hands flat on the table, something she did to calm herself. Gert felt halfway proud of her for practicing patience and halfway pissed off because it just emphasized how much Nico felt like she was babysitting them sometimes. Gert could be sharp and impatient herself and she knew she was smart. She sure as hell didn’t need Nico Minoru babysitting her.

*Except maybe last night*, she thought. She could’ve used Nico around last night to tell her not to get stupid with Zeke.

“Sorry, Nico,” she said, glancing around the table. “You and Zeke have obviously given this some thought. Just tell us the plan and let’s get moving.”

Nico gave her a look of gratitude. “The walls, doors, and windows are reinforced, so we’re going through the roof.”

“Won’t any doors up there be just as reinforced?” Karolina asked.

Zeke smiled. “We’re not using doors.”

Nico tapped on the table, as if it were the hotel roof. “We’re going *through* the roof. Karolina’s going to give them a light show outside the north side of the hotel. Zeke thinks Carlos and Tess are being held in the top floor penthouse, south side. His mother’s suite.”

“Possibly sedated,” Zeke said. “So we might have to carry them out of there.”

“We’ll go in the *Leapfrog*, get as much altitude as we can,” Nico continued, “and then Zeke will jump. He’ll body-swap with the Kurdogrim on the way down, smash through the roof, and then the rest of us follow.”

“Not exactly subtle,” Chase said.

“Understatement of the year,” Gert muttered. She wanted to support Nico, but Chase was right.

“These kids are us, basically,” Nico said. “Maybe their parents won’t kill them, or maybe they will. Now that they know their kids aren’t willing to accept the crazy ritual inheritance they had in mind, maybe they’ll just sacrifice them to the Kurdogrim. We’ve got to stop the Nightwatch, guys. And if we can do that tonight, great. But that’s the long-term goal. The short-term goal is making sure Carlos and Tess survive their trip to L.A.”

Karolina sat forward. “So Chase lands the *Frog* on top of the hotel. Zeke’s the first one inside, followed by the rest of us.”

“Not Chase,” Gert said quickly. “His Fistigons were destroyed—”

“I’m working on new ones,” Chase said quickly. The Fistigons were essentially multipurpose tech weapons the user wore as gloves. Chase’s parents had made the originals, but they’d been destroyed, and Chase had been tinkering away on replacements for a while.

“They aren’t ready yet,” Gert reminded him. “Plus you’ve got to be the wheel man, right? We’re going to be moving fast and that means we need a getaway driver. You can’t go in without weapons, babe, and you can’t leave the *Frog* unattended on the roof.”

Nico gave Gert what seemed like a reluctant glance. “Actually—”

Gert held up a finger. “No. I’m not staying behind like last night. Old Lace and I are coming. Yes, I’ll let you and Molly and Karolina go ahead of me, but Old Lace and I are going to back you up. The Nightwatch aren’t a joke. These aren’t Russian gangsters or drug dealers. They’re on the level of the Pride and we’ve never fought them before. You got lucky against the Crimson Cowl last night, Nico. If we’re doing this at all, it has to be together. All for one and one for all.”

Nico hesitated.

"She's right," Chase said.

"Definitely," Molly added.

"I agree," Karolina said. "There's only one problem. If we're all going..."

One by one, they all turned to glance at Allis. She had taken the seat next to Karolina. For the first time Gert noticed how close they were sitting and wondered if a romance might be brewing. It was sweet. After what she'd been through, Allis needed someone she could trust and confide in. More than a romance, she needed a friend. Gert frowned, thinking how quickly she'd accepted that Allis was a friend. She didn't usually warm up to people quickly, but something about the girl made her seem like she was already one of them—like she'd always been one of them.

"What?" Allis said, shifting in her seat.

Chase shrugged. "We bring her."

Karolina shook her head. "No way."

Allis glanced between them, and realization flickered across her eyes. "Wait—you think I'm coming with you? Not a chance. I'm grateful to you guys for letting me crash here, but wasn't the whole point of that to keep me from getting killed? I mean, okay, turns out these Nightwatch people weren't the ones who wanted to sacrifice me to their dark gods, but they didn't seem too interested in saving my life, either."

The whole room went quiet, contemplating. Karolina seemed especially conflicted.

Gert said what she figured most of them were thinking. "You're probably right, Allis. But we're all going, and we can't leave you here by yourself. No offense. You seem nice, and I feel like we can trust you, but we've known you like a day and a half."

"We *can* trust her," Karolina said suddenly. "She'll be fine."

"How do you know?" Nico asked.

A furtive look passed between Allis and Karolina. Gert had never seen Karolina trust someone so quickly, either, but she understood. Karolina clearly liked Allis and the feeling seemed mutual. Karolina wanted to help the girl, but that didn't mean they could leave Allis here alone.

"Even if we do trust you," Gert began, "there are a lot of ways you could get hurt here without us. Only Chase really knows this place well. The rest of us are figuring it out. There's no way of knowing what the Pride built into this place. Leaving you alone...if anything happened to you..."

"Maybe we should let her stay," Molly said. "We won't be gone long."

Allis seemed nervous instead of relieved. "Gert seems to think staying here's just as dangerous. I mean, I don't see it, but I also don't want to get sliced up by some home security laser grid you guys haven't discovered yet."

Chase raised his hand as if they were in a classroom. "There's no home security laser grid. I don't think. But if I have to stay on board the *Leapfrog*, you can stay with me." He smiled at the girl. "You'll be safe. Mostly."

"Mostly? Well, that's reassuring," Allis said.

Karolina put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "We won't let anything happen to you."

Allis sighed. "Okay. I guess I get to be a Super Hero for the night."

"We're not Super Heroes," Gert said, knowing she sounded a bit prickly.

Allis smiled. "Okay."



Gert caught up to Zeke outside the room he'd slept in. Nico had told them they had ninety minutes to use however they wanted before the mission began and Gert really wanted to head into the cavern to be with Chase. He'd be prepping the

*Leapfrog* or maybe working on his new *Fistigons*, and given the afternoon they'd had that she wanted to stay close. But this conversation needed to happen first.

Zeke had just opened the door to his room. He wore a tired smile. She figured he was happy to have help in rescuing his friends, but it surprised her that he didn't seem more nervous.

"Hey," she said, making him flinch. "Can I talk to you?"

Zeke smiled cautiously. He stood in the open doorway of his room. "Sure. Out here, or do you want to come in?"

"No, no, here's good."

Gert felt a rush of heat to her face. The corridor lights were dim and she was grateful that Zeke wouldn't be able to see her blushing.

"That's a shame," Zeke said. "What did you want to talk about?"

"That," she said, pointing at him. "That right there."

"Can you maybe elaborate?"

"The innuendo. No more of that. I told you last night that I have a boyfriend."

Zeke nodded sagely. "You did, Gertrude. Absolutely. You made sure to explicitly state that you have a boyfriend. Then you went and flirted with me anyway. Which is bound to make a guy wonder."

"I didn't mean anything by it. That's why I told you—"

"You told me you and Chase were together so you could flirt and consider it harmless."

Gert blinked. He'd taken the wind out of her sails by sounding so reasonable. "Well, yeah."

Zeke moved closer to her—close enough that she felt like she could feel the warmth of his body. "I'm not going to try to touch you, Gert. I'm not going to kiss you unless you tell me you want to be kissed. I'm not some sketchy freak and I'm not so full of myself that I think every girl wants me to kiss her. But last night...you thought maybe it was safe, that mentioning Chase made it okay, that we were just playing."

He turned and went into his room, stood with one hand on the bedroom door as he studied her.

"I wasn't just playing," he said, and he closed the door, quietly but firmly. The click seemed to echo like a gunshot in her ears.

For a few seconds, Gert just stared at the door. Her heart was pounding. She knew she loved Chase. On the other hand, she couldn't deny there was truth in Zeke's words.

Blushing again, alone in the corridor, she turned and started back toward the stairs, her mind racing ahead to all of them being jammed together on board the *Leapfrog*.

*Great, she thought. This isn't going to be awkward at all.*



Molly perched at the open hatch of the *Leapfrog* with the wind whooshing past her head. They were mid-leap and Chase toggled the controls of the *Frog* to keep them on target as the vehicle arced up, up, and farther up—as high as one leap from the tallest building near the Trumbull Bel Air could take them.

Down below, to one side of the hotel, they could see Karolina begin her light show. From above it looked so beautiful as she zigged and zagged, painting the night with colors. On the street, people would be looking up. Some would be filled with wonder, *oohing* and *aahing* like they were at some Fourth of July celebration. Molly knew who those people would be—tourists, mostly. People from L.A. would know better. Whether they'd heard about the Runaways or not, locals would scatter and take cover or at least hurry toward their destination. L.A. wasn't New York City, in the sense that it wasn't completely overrun with super-powered individuals. Super-battles weren't so common here that they didn't show up on the TV news, but they happened often enough that no matter how pretty

Karolina's colors were, they would be making a lot of people nervous right now. Molly thought that was incredibly sad.

But she didn't want to be sad right now. Not when they were in the middle of something so frickin' cool. And Karolina's light show would draw civilians away from where the real action was going to be. She turned to gaze at Zeke.

"You're jumping out of a ship in midair!" she reminded him happily.

He laughed, the sound warped by the wind whipping around them. "It sounds pretty crazy when you say it!"

"That's because it is!" Molly shouted.

"Go, go, go!" Chase called from the cockpit.

Zeke gave Molly a little salute. Very serious, she saluted back, one hand holding tightly to the strap beside the open hatch. The wind howled in. Zeke glanced at Gert, tipped her a wink, and then hurled himself out of the *Leapfrog*, plummeting toward the neon sign on top of the hotel, hundreds of feet below.

Molly wondered what it must look like from the outside. The *Leapfrog* was cloaked, so anyone watching would have seen Zeke just appear as if from nowhere, like one of the wizards at Hogwarts apparating or something. Nico took Zeke's place at the hatch, the two girls staring down as Zeke got smaller and smaller, plummeting...until suddenly he got much, much bigger.

Molly liked being strong. She liked being able to defend herself. Being a mutant came with some pretty scary baggage at times—especially if the government found out—but super strength let her be confident and brave. Watching Kurdo-Zeke fall made her a little jealous. She might be strong but she was pretty small, and the idea of being huge and having a giant battle-ax appealed to her very much.

The *Leapfrog* dropped fast. Chase controlled the descent and he wouldn't let them crash, but they were following Kurdo-Zeke down so swiftly that Molly held her breath.

Down below, Zeke smashed through the roof and Molly swore loudly.

"We talked about your profanity," Gert admonished her from farther back in the *Frog*. "This is one of the reasons you need to go to school."

"You think they don't swear in school?" Molly asked, not meaning to be sassy.

The subject dropped. They were falling fast and all of them were staring at the big hole in the roof with light streaming up through it from inside. This time it was Nico who swore.

"That wasn't me!" Molly called.

The *Leapfrog* hitched, retro-power kicking in, slowing their fall, and then they were gliding toward the roof from a hundred feet. Seventy feet. Thirty feet. Below them, Karolina darted over the hotel and flew right down into the hole, joining whatever fight was already in progress. The retros kicked in again. With a hiss, Chase set the *Frog* down.

"Move!" Nico shouted.

Molly jumped out, wishing she had an ax. She led the way, running for the huge hole in the roof. When she reached the edge, she threw herself over, ready for a fight.





# ELEVEN

Chase kept the *Leapfrog* in stealth mode. For half a second, he forgot to seal the hatch, and then he hesitated a moment or two, worried about what would happen when they all came running back and he had to dust off in a hurry. Would the few seconds it took to open the hatch cost them their lives—or at least some injuries?

Allis slipped up beside him in the cockpit. Beautiful and scared, red hair framing her pale features, she strapped herself in.

“Wishing you’d stayed behind?” he asked.

“Kind of,” she admitted. “Also wondering why you closed the door.”

“Stealth mode isn’t as effective when you can see an open hatch.”

“But Zeke just crashed through the roof. They made a ton of noise going in. It’s not like we’ve got the element of surprise.”

Chase grimaced, trying to make it look more like a grin. “That doesn’t mean we want every surveillance camera—

never mind eyewitnesses in other buildings—to be able to get a good look at the *Leapfrog*. They'll know it was the Runaways who did this."

"Karolina just made a very colorful diversion, and if there are any surveillance cameras, they'll have picked up the whole team jumping down through the hole in the roof. If anybody knows who you guys are, they'll definitely recognize you."

Shifting uneasily in his seat, Chase nodded, keeping that fake smile on his face. Allis might be beautiful, but she also had succeeded in getting on his nerves. Whether they wanted to or not, the girls on his team often made him feel stupid. When it came to tech and code and machines he was smarter than any of them, but he knew he didn't have much common sense. He didn't need Allis to remind him. As wrong as he knew it was—and he cringed inwardly at the thought—just this once he'd hoped the beautiful girl would also turn out not to be smarter than him.

With the sounds of battle and the shouts of his friends coming to him over the comms unit in his left ear, he reached out and hit the switch to open the hatch. It hissed as it rose. He left the *Frog* in stealth mode.

"Happy now?" he asked. His comms unit was muted. He didn't want his conversation to distract the girls in the midst of the assault on the hotel.

Allis snickered, and Chase glared at her.

"What?" he demanded.

"Are you always this much of a brat?"

He sighed. "Not always."

"I guess it's what comes of being the only guy surrounded by girls, right? I mean, you think they should be making a fuss about you or something, but instead they tease you."

"Hang on," he said, holding up one finger. He thought he'd heard his name over the comms, but it was just Molly

shouting for Old Lace, so he turned to Allis again. "Let me ask you a question. Do you think Zeke is good-looking?"

Allis laughed. "Well, yeah. Of course. But he's also totally full of himself and a little too pretty. Some girls like that. Others don't want a guy who's going to draw more attention when they walk into a room than she will."

"And Gert? Which kind of girl do you think she is?"

Allis rolled her eyes. "You can't be serious."

"I'm totally serious."

She patted him on the knee. "Sweetie, listen. The glasses, the attitude...she's in her head ninety-nine percent of the time. A girl like that sees a guy like Zeke and—if he's nice to her—she's gonna feel it. That's the one percent of the time she's not in her head. Suddenly she's reminded there's this other side of her."

Chase wanted to throw up. He felt himself flush but didn't know if it was with anger, jealousy, or embarrassment at how obvious this all seemed to Allis when to him it felt like she was translating a language he'd never known anyone even spoke.

"Well, *that* makes me feel awesome."

"Don't get me wrong," Allis hurried on. "Gert loves you. She admires you, too, which isn't always the case with this stuff. At least not with some of the girls and guys I've run into. You go to the beach and you lie in the sun, but that's not real life. Home is real life. Your own bed and pillow and the way things smell and the comfort of your own space."

"In this analogy, I take it Zeke is the day at the beach and I'm the cozy bed at home?"

Allis patted his knee again. "You got it. Just relax. He's no threat to you."

Chase nodded thoughtfully. He wished he had working Fistigons. Yes, he had weapons on board and could have put something together that would have helped this rescue mission, but not like the Fistigons. They had given him an edge, made it worth the risk of a fight. The others were all

more likely to come out alive than he was—even Gert, because she and Old Lace had their psychic connection and the dinosaur was like an extension of her in a battle. Bullets would do real damage, even kill them, but when they worked as a team, they'd always been all right.

He had to finish those new Fistigons. Not that it mattered tonight. Someone needed to be the getaway driver. He just had to sit here with Allis and wait.

A frown creased his forehead. "Y'know, Allis, you should really go home."

She stared at him, drawing her hand back. "What do you mean?"

Chase shrugged. "We're runaways, yeah. But we're also orphans. We have nowhere to go, and even if our parents were alive, they were legit evil. But the way you were just talking about the comforts of home, something tells me maybe your life isn't as bad as all that."

She glanced away, a pained look in her eyes, and he realized he'd touched a nerve.

"It's...it's complicated," she said, wiping at the moisture welling at the corners of her eyes.

"Of course, yeah. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

Gert's voice crackled over the comms. "Chase, you there?"

He unmuted. "You got me. Have you found Zeke's friends?"

"They're here. But I don't know if we—Wait! Old Lace, that way! Get that guy! Don't let him...Damn it!"

The sound of gunfire erupted, so loud it had to be very close to Gert. Chase started to shout her name and then, knowing how absurd it was, he called for Old Lace, as if the dinosaur could hear him.

Allis unbuckled herself and started toward the hatch.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To help. Somehow. You've got to stay here. If you and the *Leapfrog* aren't waiting for them and ready to go,

they're screwed. But I'm just a freeloader. Time for me to do my part."

Chase glared at her. "Do you have powers you haven't been telling me about?"

"Of course not. Don't be stupid."

He unbuckled himself and climbed into the back of the *Leapfrog*. With the twist of a knob, he opened a panel, reached down, and drew out an old plasma pistol his parents had built.

"Take this," he said, "but you're not going anywhere. You're staying right here. If you go into the hotel, you're just one more person we might have to rescue. When they come up out of that roof they're going to have trouble right behind them. You see anyone who isn't clearly on our side, you shoot. Can you do that?"

Allis grinned. "Does this make me part of the team?"

Chase hesitated, then thought, *What the hell?* "Tonight it does. Just for tonight."

"Tonight's good!" Allis replied, and she knelt in the open hatch, blaster in hand, and waited.

Chase strapped himself back in, powered up the *Leapfrog's* laser cannons, and waited.



Nico used the Staff of One to crack a guard across the face and then kicked him in the balls. In an all-out assault on the secret lair of a group of elder-god-worshipping superhumans, there was no room for delicacy. They'd gotten lucky at first. Zeke had marched through the corridor ahead of them, hunched over to keep from hitting his head, and floored the first three armed security guards they'd encountered. Molly had picked up a massive chunk of fallen ceiling and used it to blockade the emergency exit stairs, so nobody could come up that way. The elevator was a

problem, but Karolina had taken care of it by fusing the doors together and burning out the electrical system that controlled it.

Zeke had picked the spot on the roof for their assault. He'd been confident about where the Nightwatch would be holding their prisoners, and now he led the way. He tore off doors and ignored bullets that smashed into his Kurdogrim flesh. Karolina and Molly were right behind him. Molly took out several other guards. Alarms sounded and emergency lights flashed as Nico followed, with Gert and Old Lace bringing up the rear. A roar behind her made Nico turn just in time to see the dinosaur crashing through frosted glass into what seemed like some kind of meditation room full of flowering plants and ergonomic chairs, but the only thing that Old Lace chased out of the room in a shower of glass was a fat orange cat.

"Old Lace!" Gert called. "Stop fooling around."

Men and women in suits came at them, not executives but Secret Service—type security. A massive pair of wooden doors blocked their way at the end of a hallway full of mirrored glass and gleaming brass and esoteric modern art, like someone's idea of a place rich people ought to live instead of anything resembling a home.

Kurdo-Zeke was so focused on rescuing his friends that he seemed almost to have forgotten the Runaways were with him. With the strength of his monstrous form, he crashed through those massive wooden doors, sending splinters everywhere. Inside was an enormous penthouse suite, a sprawling room with thirty-foot ceilings, an entire wall of windows looking out onto the city, artfully arranged furniture, and a glowing gold koi pond right in the center.

"What now?" Nico demanded.

Zeke pointed to the right, along a corridor. "That way," he said without turning. "The 'safe rooms' are down the hall. Nothing's supposed to be able to get in. They said the rooms were for our safety in case of an attack, but my

mother told me they'd been used to hold prisoners before. That's where Tess and Carlos will be. If Molly can't smash the doors in, I'm sure you can figure something out. Get my friends."

Gert and Old Lace were still back in the foyer, but Karolina and Molly had caught up with them, both breathing heavy, both glancing around, worried.

"What are you going to do?" Nico asked.

"I'm gonna say hi," Zeke replied.

For the first time, Nico saw motion beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, saw that there were sliding doors set into the glass and an enormous terrace outside. Clad all in white, beautiful and emotionless save for the narrowing of her eyes, Zeke's mother stared in at them from the terrace. She slid the glass doors open and stepped inside.

"Go!" Kurdo-Zeke growled.

"Bad idea," Karolina said.

Zeke's mother only stared at her son. For a moment her emotionless mask cracked and her disappointment was plain.

"Come on," Nico said, ignoring Karolina's concern.

"Before reinforcements arrive."

She ran from the vast, elegant room into the side corridor with Molly and Karolina in tow. A hiss came from behind her and she glanced back to see that Gert and Old Lace had caught up to them. They were committed now. Whatever happened, they were in the middle of it.

"What about Zeke?" Gert called as they reached a turn in the corridor.

Nico just waved them all onward. She didn't want to leave Zeke, but the woman was his mother. If he wanted to face her alone, if he felt confident he could and needed this confrontation, she wasn't going to interfere.

The corridor became narrower. There were doors, but just a few, and they opened into ordinary rooms—bedrooms and bathrooms and somebody's office. They reached another

corner. Nico careened around it, feeling each tick of the clock, and bullets tore up the floor and wall, one shot so close she felt it passing her cheek. She shouted for them all to take cover and dove through an open door to her right, rolling onto the carpet.

By the time she glanced into the corridor again, two gunmen—Nightwatch guards—had been disarmed. Karolina had blasted the guns from their hands, and the guards were both backing away as Molly raced silently toward them. They looked confused by the sight of this little girl. At the last moment they realized they ought to defend themselves despite her size, and then they were on the floor with broken bones and probably concussions.

Nico stepped back into the corridor. She nodded her thanks to the other girls. Old Lace moved past them all, stepping over the groaning guards as if they weren't even there. They scrambled quickly away from the dinosaur, cradling broken bones but terrified of Old Lace. She gnashed at the air, snorted, and raced up to a pair of doors at the end of the corridor.

"I've got it," Karolina said, taking aim not at the doorknob but at the enormous locking mechanism just above it.

Nico squinted against the brightness of the lasers that burned from Karolina's fingers, strobing in orange and purple and green. The beams tightened and brightened and smoke rose from the heavy lock, but though Karolina bit her lip and a bead of sweat formed on her brow, the lasers would not cut.

"What the heck is this thing made of?" Karolina said, almost pouting.

Molly stepped in without a word. She tried the knob first, twisted to yank it off, but she couldn't snap the metal. Cursing quietly, she made a fist and punched the door, just above the lock. Then she kicked it, and kicked it again. The



whole wall shook—the whole corridor shook—but the door would not give way.

“Nico, this isn’t working,” Gert warned. “If the rest of the Nightwatch come for us—”

“I know!” Nico snapped. “Let me think!”

She’d used *Open Sesame* as a spell before. There were variations on that, spells she might be able to use to open it, but she couldn’t be sure what would work, especially since these doors were more heavily fortified than anything she’d ever encountered.

The whole building seemed to shake. A loud crash echoed back from the way they’d come. The others looked at Nico, but she didn’t need their urgency to know time was running out.

“I’ve got an idea,” she told them.

“Whatever it is—” Karolina started.

“Hush,” Nico said. Holding out her staff, she focused on what she wanted. “*Ordinary Door.*”

Simple, straightforward, clear.

Nothing changed. The door looked the same, even down to the new shine on the locking mechanism where Karolina had tried to burn through it.

“What happened?” Molly asked. “Why didn’t it work?”

“It did,” Nico said. “It had to. When I cast a spell, I can feel it, and I *felt* it.”

“Look at the door, Nico,” Gert said, trying to twist the knob herself. “It’s still like the vault at Gringotts.”

Another crash came from along the hall. Nico felt like screaming. She stared at the door, wondering what was going on. Her spell had worked—she knew it had—and yet it looked as if nothing at all had changed.

She turned to the others. “It’s an illusion. Maybe that Abernathy guy is more powerful than we thought or maybe it’s tech, but the spell worked. It just doesn’t look it. Molly, try it again!”

Molly frowned, but she hauled back one small fist and smashed the door open. It tore halfway off its hinges and swung in, twisted, barely hanging on the frame. Sure enough, the door seemed entirely ordinary—thick but hollow Masonite. The lock had shattered, ordinary metal instead of Adamantium or Vibranium or whatever it had originally been made of. Someone shouted from inside the room and they looked up to see a young guy lunge for cover beside the bed. A moment later his head popped up. His curly brown hair had copper highlights the same color as his eyes, but his expression was almost comical.

“Carlos,” Nico said, confident they’d found him. “We’re with Zeke.”

“Zeke’s here?” Carlos asked hopefully, jumping up and striding toward them.

“I assume Tess is in the room across the wall,” Gert said.

“Me, too, but I don’t know for...Holy crap, is that a dinosaur?”

Nico stepped back to let him into the corridor. “Focus. You need to help my friends set Tess free. I left Zeke to deal with his mother and I’m starting to think that was a bad idea.”

She turned to run back the way they’d come, but stopped when she saw a little gray mouse racing along the corridor, darting along the baseboard as if terrified of something that would be coming along behind it. That was Nico’s thought, but something didn’t make sense. The mouse didn’t hesitate. It came right toward them.

Then it grew, morphing in an instant from mouse to five hundred pounds of Bengal tiger. With a roar, the tiger leaped for her throat. Nico froze, the Staff of One useless in her hand, knowing the tiger’s jaws would tear out her throat even as it clawed open her chest. Knowing she was dead.

Old Lace ducked past her and leaped at the tiger, coming up beneath it, jaws snapping shut on the tiger’s throat. Karolina wrapped her arms around Nico and twisted her out of the way as the tiger and the dinosaur crashed to the floor

and careened against the wall, gnashing and snapping, clawing each other.

Karolina's fingers danced with vivid laser light as she took aim, but she hesitated, afraid she would hit Old Lace.

"Don't hesitate!" Carlos snapped. "She'll kill you all otherwise!"

"She?" Nico asked. "How do you know it's a—"

"It's my mother!"

Gert shoved him aside. "Old Lace, get away from her. She's a shape-shifter. You don't know what else she can—"

The tiger became a silverback gorilla. Its eyes were cold and determined and it picked up Old Lace and hurled her against the opposite door—that impossible-to-open door.

Nico raised her staff, thinking of a spell, but Molly stepped up.

"Go help Zeke," Molly said. "We've gotta get out of here. Old Lace and I will take gorilla-woman while the others get Tess's door open."

Nico didn't hesitate. Molly was right. The Ordinary Door spell wouldn't work again, so they'd have to find another way, and if Zeke died, they'd gone through all of this for nothing.

As the fight continued and the corridor lit up with Karolina's rainbow, she raced back the way they'd come, watching for further attackers. The injured guards had crawled into a side room and cowered as she passed by. Then she turned the last corner and ran into the room where they'd left Zeke. Broken glass littered the floor. The entire wall of windows had been obliterated and the wind from outside whirled through the room.

Bleeding and furious, Kurdo-Zeke had gone down. As Nico rushed in, he struggled up to one knee and glanced around for his battle-ax. He reached for it, but Nico glanced around in confusion, wondering where his mother had gone. Then she glanced up at the shadows overhead and saw

Kathryn Zheng hanging in midair, just beneath the vaulted ceiling.

“Back the hell off!” Nico shouted, holding up her staff.  
*“Anchors Aweigh!”*

As if she had massive iron weights on her legs, Zeke’s mother plummeted to the floor. Kathryn hit feetfirst, nearly fell over, then tried to rush at Zeke only to find that her feet would not move. The Nightwatch’s elemental was anchored to the floor.

“Zeke,” Nico said, rushing to him. “We’ve got Carlos but I think they need you to help open the door and get Tess—”

“Idiot girl!” Kathryn snarled. “How stupid are you? Or perhaps you’re just as corrupt as your wretched parents. The Nightwatch is here to repair the damage the Pride did to this city.”

Kurdogrim Zeke laughed, his voice a throaty rumble as he hefted his ax. Towering over Nico, he turned toward his mother. “I guess you think she really *is* stupid.”

“You dare wear the face of a Kurdogrim after you’ve betrayed them. You don’t understand the consequences of your betrayal, Ezekiel?” Kathryn sneered. “You know they will destroy you.”

Zeke glanced down at Nico. “You see what she is? Still a slave to the Kurdogrim.”

Ax in one hand, he grabbed his mother in the other. The wind raged into a cyclone inside the room, but he had his grip on her now. In spite of the weight of her feet, Kurdogrim Zeke turned and hurled his mother out through the shattered glass wall, right over the edge of the terrace and into open air, twenty-three stories up.

“Zeke, what did you do?” Nico cried, rushing toward the terrace, boots crunching broken glass.

“She’s an elemental! The wind’ll catch her,” he rumbled. Then he turned toward the corridor, heading for the room where Tess remained imprisoned.

Nico raised her staff. *"Raise Anchor,"* she said quietly. Evil or not, she wasn't going to let her magic be the thing that caused Kathryn Zheng to fall to her death. The spell would release the extra weight on her.

Which meant she'd be back.

Even with the wind around her, Nico heard the popping noise behind her. As she turned, she remembered where she'd heard it before—down in that abandoned L.A. subway station where they'd rescued Allis from being murdered by the Pride's leftover minions. The pop had accompanied the arrival of the Nightwatch's teleporter, Carlos's dad, Emilio.

As she turned, Nico nearly collided with him. The eyes of Emilio Ochoa were black with fury, unnatural and gleaming and so deep they seemed almost to draw her in. He drew his sword from the scabbard at his hip. Whatever Emilio might be, he was more than just a teleporter.

Nico raised the Staff of One, trying to decide if she should cast a spell to take away his sword or his ability to teleport. His eyes flickered with understanding.

"Witch," he rasped. "Just like your mother."

"*St—*" Nico began, thinking *Stay Put*. Such a spell would make him more vulnerable, that the others could take Emilio down.

He jabbed so swiftly that the sword punched through her chest before she could finish the spell's first syllable. The breath bubbled from her lips and she coughed once. Instinct had made her turn, just the tiniest bit, or he'd probably have run her through the heart.

*But this is close enough,* she thought. *He's killed me.*

Emilio's anger wavered. He drew his sword out and Nico collapsed to the glass-strewn floor, enduring a hundred tiny cuts that were nothing compared to the split in her chest.

The Staff of One felt warm in her hand. She gripped it tightly. *"Bubble Wrap."*

Her thoughts were already fading to black. Finding the words for the spell would have been difficult, so all she

could do was rely on what she felt. What she wanted out of her magic. In her mind, the pop of Emilio's teleportation reminded her of the sound of Bubble Wrap, and nobody just got one pop out of a piece of Bubble Wrap. You twisted it, you stamped on it, you enjoyed every second of it. *Pop, pop, poppoppop, poppop, pop, pop...*

Emilio Ochoa, his sword wet with her blood, teleported across the room, then back, then again and again, vanishing and reappearing every second or two, so that he could barely shout at her, barely take a breath to rage at what she'd done to him before he vanished again and then reappeared out on the terrace or in the foyer outside Kathryn's apartment or just inches away from Nico. *Pop, pop, poppoppop, poppop, pop, pop...*

Then he vanished. Or the darkness dragged Nico down into unconsciousness as her blood spilled out. Or both.

The room went dark.



## TWELVE

**G**ert felt the seconds ticking by in a rush. Old Lace and Molly had cornered the Nightwatch's shape-shifter in the room where Carlos had been imprisoned. *By his parents*, she thought. *The shape-shifter is his mother*. Images of her own parents filled her head, loving people who'd given her a beautiful life until she'd found out they were murdering time-traveling cultists from the future. The thought made her want to punch Carlos's mother in the face as hard as possible. The problem was that she was a giant squid at the moment, and a punch from Gert would mean nothing to her.

Tentacles slithered out from inside Carlos's prison-room. Karolina used a laser blast to burn off a few inches of tentacle and the giant squid screamed—if that sound could be called a scream—and yanked its tentacles back into the room. Through the ruined doorway, Gert saw Old Lace wrapped in a tentacle, but the dinosaur wasn't afraid. Gert would have felt it. Old Lace wasn't afraid, she was just hungry and pissed off and she bit into that tentacle and tore a chunk of calamari right out of it.

"I liked you better as a tiger!" Molly shouted, and punched the squid in the face.

A hand grabbed hold of Gert's wrist and she turned to see Carlos staring at her.

"Please," he said. "Can we get my sister and get out of here?"

Gert nodded. "Working on it."

Karolina kept trying to burn or blast through the door to the room where Tess Ochoa was locked up. The lock couldn't be damaged and they'd already tried the frame and the knob. Now they were determined to go right through the wall next to the door.

"Stand back," Karolina said. She took a deep breath to steel herself.

"I hate to state the obvious but—"

Carlos finished for her. "This isn't working."

Gert turned to him. "If you've got powers, now's the time to use them."

"I'm a shape-shifter like my mom," he said. "Which means I'm useless for this."

"Damn it," Gert said, turning back toward the fight going on through the ruined door of the other room. "Molly, time for a knockout punch. We need you."

"I'm trying!" Molly shouted back. "Jeez, I'm only one kid!"

Gert knew she was right. She racked her brain, trying to come up with some alternative way through the door of Tess's high-class jail cell. Then Karolina faltered, her face flushed, and Gert knew this wasn't working. They had to get the hell out of there, and Tess wouldn't be coming with them.

Someone shouted and Gert turned to see Kurdo-Zeke thundering down the corridor toward them. He had to bend way over, but as foolish and terrifying as he looked, Gert let out a shout of triumph.

"Yes! Zeke, get over here and knock this door down."



They all cleared the way as Zeke reached them. He glanced into the other room and the giant squid seemed to cry out as if in recognition, maybe asking him for help. The giant Zeke raised his Kurdogrim ax and swung it at the door. A dent appeared, and a scratch, but the cracking sound they heard was a stress fracture in the ax blade itself.

Zeke grumbled in frustration.

"The wall, man!" Carlos told Zeke. "Try going through the wall!"

Kurdogrim Zeke nodded heavily, knelt on the floor to get more leverage, and swung back his ax.

They heard a *pop* down the hall, turned and saw Carlos's father appear from nowhere for an instant before he teleported away. A moment later the pop came from the other end of the hall, where he manifested and then vanished again.

"What's he doing?" Karolina rasped.

"No idea," Carlos replied.

His father appeared inside the room where Molly and Old Lace were fighting his shape-shifting wife. "Rosie?" the teleporter shouted. "Keep fighting. Don't—"

*Pop.* He vanished again.

"Look," Gert said, turning to Kurdo-Zeke. "This is nuts. Try the wall with your ax. If it doesn't work, we've gotta—"

*Pop.* Emilio Ochoa appeared just beside his son. In a sliver of a moment, Gert saw the surprise in his face as he realized where he'd appeared, and then the fury as he glared at Carlos.

"Carlos," the teleporter said. "You're not going any—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence, but he did manage to wrap his arms around Carlos before he blinked out of reality again. A few seconds later Gert heard another distant pop, down the hall and around the corner, but Carlos was gone.

"No!" Kurdo-Zeke growled. He punched the wall. "It's all going wrong!"

“The door!” Gert told him. “We can still get Tess!”

Zeke nodded. He brushed Karolina away from the door to Tess’s room and raised the ax, aiming for the wall beside the door.

The whole building shook. Or perhaps not the building but this floor. The walls of the corridor and the carpet beneath their feet trembled and then jerked upward hard enough that Gert stumbled into Karolina. From the room with the squid, she felt Old Lace’s sudden rush of fear. Molly cried out and then the floor bucked again.

Karolina groaned. “What was that? Did you all feel—?”

Gert grabbed the sides of her head. The whole building started to vibrate and she felt it in her skull, felt pressure like fingers trying to dig into her brain.

*Where is she?* a voice demanded inside her head. *Where is she?*

Zeke spun toward her, his eyes wide with almost childlike terror. “We need to go. All of us, now.”

“Your friends—” Karolina started.

“We’ll try again!” Kurdogrim Zeke barked, grabbing hold of Karolina. “But we’ve got to go, now! Abernathy’s coming, don’t you see? *Abernathy’s coming!*”

He shoved Karolina down the hall. She stumbled and fell, then picked herself up and started running back the way they’d all come.

Gert shouted for Molly and Old Lace. The squid reached for them as they fled Carlos’s prison-room. Molly slapped away one tentacle, but another managed to snag Old Lace before Zeke brought his Kurdogrim ax down and chopped it off. Old Lace chuffed her thanks, and then they were all fleeing down the hall as the squid screamed or cried behind them. As Gert looked back, she saw Rosie Ochoa transform into herself. For the first time, Gert saw her as a human being instead of a monster or an animal. The wounds she’d suffered as a squid were gone, but she stumbled and fell to her knees in the hall outside her daughter’s elegant prison

cell, and she screamed after Zeke with as murderous a voice as Gert had ever heard.

*Where is she?*

Gert clamped the sides of her skull as she ran. The floor shook again.

"You asshole, Zeke, you said Abernathy was a telekinetic. You said his telepathy was weak."

"It usually is," Zeke said, "but think of his powers like the Hulk's muscles. The madder Abernathy gets—"

"The stronger he gets," Gert replied. "Fantastic."

Kurdo-Zeke stopped short ahead of her and Gert collided with his left thigh. Old Lace raced past them both, with Molly running behind her. They'd entered the room where Zeke had confronted his mother just minutes ago. Now the place was a ruin of broken glass and wrecked furniture. Gert moved around Kurdo-Zeke and was about to ask what had happened. Then she heard Karolina's voice, heard the heartbreak in the single word she spoke.

"Nico?"

Sprawled on a carpet of shattered glass, Nico lay on the floor with blood pooling around her. She looked pale and still, except for the way the wind made a lock of hair flutter across her cheek.

"No," Gert said.

Molly screamed for Nico and ran to kneel by her, picked her up as Gert told her to be careful. Old Lace sniffed at Nico as Karolina felt her wrist for a pulse.

"Is she—?"

*Where is she?* Abernathy roared inside their heads.

The building kept vibrating. Thousands of shards of glass jittered on the floor. Little ripples formed in the pool of blood beneath Nico.

"Kay," Molly said, "is she dead?"

"She has a pulse," Karolina said, turning to Gert. "But it's fading."

Gert froze, hating that Karolina was looking at her that way, as if she must be the one with the answers. All along she had thought she would make just as good a leader as Nico, maybe even better, but now they were all looking to her for leadership and she froze.

Kurdo-Zeke knelt beside Karolina and Molly while Gert and Old Lace looked on. He reached out his arms.

"Give her to me."

"What?" Gert snapped.

Kurdo-Zeke looked at her with those enormous inhuman eyes—the eyes of a thing that had survived since the beginning of time, and yet was somehow young and afraid.

"You have to trust me," the giant thing rumbled, this teenage boy in the body of an ugly, ancient god. "I'm gonna swap bodies right now, but I'm gonna take Nico with me."

"No way," Karolina said. "No way I'm letting you—"

"We're listening," Gert interrupted. "But if you swap back, why won't the Kurdogrim just kill her?"

"I'm going with her," Zeke said quickly, glancing around as if the answers could be found elsewhere. "When I swap bodies this time, I'm going to ride this body back into limbo."

"Can you do that?" Gert asked. "You said you'd swapped places with a Kurdogrim, and swapped minds with one, but can you really stay inside that body and switch places with the Kurdogrim that's using yours?"

"I've done it once before. The second Nico vanishes with me and it looks like I'm back in my body, knock me out. Fast. 'Cause it'll be a Kurdogrim trapped in my body and he'll be really pissed."

"I'm so confused," Molly said. "What the f—"

"Do it!" Gert snapped. "She's dying and we're out of time, so go!"

The Kurdogrim stood to his full height inside that vast room of broken glass. He murmured words that sounded like rocks being scraped together, and then he vanished, and

Nico along with him. In his place, in a single blink, stood the beautiful boy they'd come to know as Zeke Zheng. But in Zeke's human eyes was now a primal sort of anger and he glared at them all with suspicion.

"What is this place?" he asked, in a rasping voice nothing at all like Zeke's.

Molly walked up to him slowly. The thing inside Zeke's human body turned to stare curiously at her, not seeing the threat. Molly grabbed his wrist, tugged him toward her, and punched him in the side of the head. Zeke dropped right into her arms and she hoisted him off the ground and turned to the others.

"We need to—"

*Where is she?*

"—run."

The wind picked up, raging inside the room. Gert looked out through the broken wall of windows and saw Zeke's mother rising up, carried by the wind. The temperature in the room dropped and ice crystals began to form.

"Karolina..." Gert began.

But Karolina was one step ahead of her. She whipped her hair back, turned, and thrust out both hands toward Zeke's mother. Rainbows swirled around her arms and then tendrils of pure color burst from her hands, struck Kathryn Zheng, and blew her back with such force that she smashed through the windows of an office building across the street.

Then they were all running. Molly carried Zeke over her head with both hands. It looked ridiculous and impossible, but she could have carried them all if she'd had enough hands for it.

The floor quaked beneath them. Dust sifted down from the ceiling. A light fixture blew out. As they raced back through the foyer, Gert glanced to her left. Karolina had burned out the power to the elevators and fused the doors, but something was coming up inside the shaft. Gert could feel it there, feel the hugeness of the presence she knew

only as Abernathy. As she ran, she looked over her shoulder one last time and saw the fused elevator doors bulging outward. With a shriek of metal, they began to peel open.

Then the others were shouting at her and she turned to see the pile of rubble ahead. She scrambled up the debris to the hole in the roof with Old Lace right behind her and the feeling that Abernathy was trying to peel away her brain, to drill into her thoughts. This wasn't something elegant, not the scalpel-like mind reading she'd read about. This was brute force.

She felt faint for a moment, but Old Lace bumped her, and a moment later Molly had grabbed her and they were climbing into the *Leapfrog* with Chase shouting at them to buckle in and Allis helping Karolina strap Zeke's unconscious body into a chair, and then they were leaping into the air and Chase whipped around in the cockpit to stare at her.

"Gert, where's Nico?" he demanded. "Where is she?"

*Where is she?*

They all turned to stare at her. At Gert Yorkes, the new leader of the Runaways—at least for now. At least until they knew whether Nico would ever come back from the Kurdogrim's limbo. Until they knew if Nico would come back alive.

*I'm in charge*, she thought.

*Holy shit.*



Nico dreamed of pain and music. Her eyes fluttered open to a gray nothing-space full of smoke or mist that smelled like old leather, stale beer, and cat piss in roughly equal measure. Her nose wrinkled and she let her eyes close, preferring the dream. Or was this still the dream? The pain lingered in her chest. She tasted blood and knew it was her own. A strange chanting and percussion echoed quietly,

filling the air around her as completely as the smoke, so that it seemed to her blurred mind that the smoke itself might be making the music.

She groaned and rolled onto her side, pulled her legs up nearly into a fetal position. Her chest hurt as if her rib cage had been cracked open and she knew the pain was not a dream—not unless the whole thing turned out to be a dream. The smoke, the stink, the chant, the pain. Eyes still closed, she brought her hands to her chest, and felt the sticky wetness there. Nico opened her eyes as she raised her hands toward her face, and even in the gray nothing-space she could see that her fingers were red with blood.

Her body jerked and she felt it again, the sword punching through her chest. With a cough, she spat blood into the smoke and the act of coughing tore her up inside, her body rigid with agony. But the music continued, the chanting, and somehow the agony receded just a little and she drifted off into a place even more gray, even more nothing.

When consciousness swam to the surface again, her hands went immediately to her chest, to that blood. It felt cooler, tackier, as if it was drying, but now her fingers searched for and found the slice in her shirt where the sword had impaled her. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes and she tensed as she probed for the wound...and found it. She groaned and tried to make sense of what she felt. This wasn't the gaping, bleeding hole she'd expected, but a long cut, closed and crusted, as if a knife had slit her skin instead of a sword running her through.

When she tried to move the pain screamed inside her and she slid into darkness again.

Time passed before a muddled awareness returned. The music had faded. At first she thought she could still hear it, but as she felt the strange, soft ground beneath her and the ache in her chest and the weakness in her bones, her mind came more fully awake and she realized what music she still heard was only lingering memory. The song had ended. With

a groan, and quite gingerly, she tried to shift again, and this time she managed to lift her head slightly. Nausea roiled in her gut at the motion and unconscious threatened to claim her again, but she breathed the leathery stale piss smell and forced herself not to pass out.

There might not have been music, but this place was not silent. There were voices in the smoke. As she peered deeper into it, looking toward those voices, she realized that she could see the hulking silhouettes of strange figures, darker inside the gray. Things scraped the ground and there were soft huffs of breath, but mostly it was just words in a language that her brain told her she ought to understand, as if her ancestors had known it but she was too much a part of today's world and had lost the ability to translate.

Then there came another voice, this one familiar.

"...you saved her," came that voice. "She'd have died for sure."

Nico raised herself up on one elbow. Weak, her thoughts still muddled, she whispered into the smoke. "Zeke? What did you do?"

Not *where are we*, because she knew the answer to that. Even with all the blood she'd lost and the pain that fuzzed her memories, there was only one place this could be. If it was the weird limbo dimension where the Gibborim had been trapped, they'd have killed her already. *Or just let me die*, she thought. So it wasn't the Gibborim. With Zeke here, it had to be the Kurdogrim's domain. He'd brought her here—or the Kurdogrim had dragged them both here. Now they were raging at him, clearly furious, and Zeke was thanking them for saving someone.

For saving her. Nico knew it was the only thing that made sense.

*I was on the verge. Emilio jammed that sword right through me...he killed me.*

Yet somehow she still lived. In this weird netherworld, she still breathed and still felt pain. Pain meant life. Zeke had



somehow gotten a tribe of ancient Elder Gods of the Earth, evil bastards who were usually more interested in exterminating humanity than in saving one girl, to keep Nico alive. The big question was why. What had Zeke promised them in return?

"Zeke?" she called again, trying to crawl toward those voices. The second she started to get onto her knees, pain ripped through her and she had to breathe through her nose to keep from puking. Even then she nearly passed out.

Through the stinking smoke, their voices still floated to her but they seemed not to hear her.

"No, no, no," Zeke kept saying. "My mother and the rest of the Nightwatch don't speak for me. I'm not like them."

Nico frowned. What had he promised them? It seemed like the answer was nothing, but if he'd given them nothing, why would they help her? Kathryn Zheng had implied the Nightwatch were the good guys in this situation, but then she'd seemed angry at Zeke for betraying the Kurdogrim... hadn't she? And Nico knew from experience that these tribes of supposed Elder Gods of the Earth were hideous things, cruel and bloodthirsty with a hatred of humanity. Zeke had brought her here to save her, and now it sounded like the Kurdogrim were threatening him. She had to do what she could to help him.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Nico started to drag herself toward those voices. Her thoughts and awareness blurred, but she knew her wound was healing. She'd lost a lot of blood, but whatever they'd done was restoring her slowly but surely.

She dragged herself two or three feet. She was still clutching her staff. No one was getting that, not over her dead body. Wavering, she nearly collapsed onto her chest but she knew the pain would black her out, and so she paused to breathe. Suddenly the stink of the smoke strengthened, the acrid piss and dry old leather smells enveloped her in their own cloud, and she had the

overwhelming sense of something behind her in the smoke, something huge filling the void of that gray smoke world.

Resting on her hip, she began to turn, and saw the figure looming in the smoke off to her right. No sound had betrayed its arrival, so perhaps it had been sitting there all along, wreathed in smoke, unseen. This Kurdogrim had tusks that jutted up from its lower jaw and a long, knotted beard with iron rings tied to thick corded strands of it that clanked like wind chimes now, as it turned its head to sneer at her.

Then she felt herself falling. All feeling left her body for a moment, as if she had begun to float, and then she struck the ground and a spike of pain worse than anything she'd ever experienced or imagined slammed through her chest, and the blackness swept in, and Nico drowned in it, all conscious thought winking out like a lantern dashed against a rock.

Only the stink stayed with her.



## THIRTEEN

**M**olly had passed out on the *Leapfrog*, drained by using her powers. Someone had carried her into her room and she'd slept for a while. When she crashed like that, she usually slept like the dead, but this time she'd had a terrible nightmare where they'd all been at Nico's funeral. Even Captain America had been there, standing in the rain. He'd been crying. In her dream, Molly had fallen to her knees and tried to dig up Nico's grave with her bare hands. She'd snapped awake after that, still incredibly tired, but she had forced herself not to go back to sleep. She was afraid to have that dream again.

Now she tapped lightly on the glass-that-wasn't-really-glass. Inside its cell, the thing that looked like Zeke Zheng didn't move.

"Don't do that, Molly," Gert said.

"He's still knocked out," Molly replied. "I just hope I didn't scramble his eggs too much."

Karolina knelt beside Molly. "'Scramble his eggs'?"

"I kinda made it up. I mean I hope I didn't give him brain damage or something."

"I got it," Karolina assured her. "I hope so, too."

It had come as no surprise to them that the new Hostel had a little wing of holding cells in a subbasement. A short corridor with two cells on either side and a larger one at the very end, with a sort of viewing area in front of it. Yawning, Molly stared through the glass-that-wasn't-really-glass at the prison-style bunk in the room. It was bolted to the floor and Zeke lay unconscious on top of it, where Chase and Karolina had dumped him.

"This is wrong," Allis said quietly. "I feel like we're at the zoo."

Molly frowned. She'd forgotten Allis was there in the room with them. When they had first rescued the girl from the Nightwatch, Molly had sort of liked her, but now it felt like she wanted to be part of their group—one of the Runaways—and it was too soon. Allis wanted to belong and Molly understood that, but the girl was forcing it. They'd given her a room. She could have gone there. Instead she stood at the back of the viewing area, looking awkward, disapproving of the rest of them.

"It's nothing like a zoo," Chase said, tucking his hair behind his ears. He did it when he felt self-conscious or irritated. "If he wakes up and it's Zeke, we'll let him out, but unless Nico suddenly appears, we need to assume it's still the Kurdogrim in there."

"How sure are we that Nico's even coming back?" Allis asked.

Molly shot her a dark look. "Who's 'we'?"

Karolina glanced at her, looking hurt, like it had been her that Molly snapped at. "That's not very nice."

"I agree with Allis," Gert said. "It does feel wrong. Seeing him in there..."

"Here we go," Chase muttered.

Gert glanced at him. "What does that mean?"

He threw up his hands with an innocent smile. "Nothing."

"I know you don't like him," Gert said.

"Doesn't matter if I like him. I don't *trust* him."

Molly tapped on the not-glass again, trying to see if she could wake the Kurdogrim currently unconscious inside of Zeke. She was curious, now that it was trapped in the cell and couldn't hurt them. Maybe it could give them some advice about how to fight the Nightwatch. A stupid thought, probably. Why would it want to help them? But still...she tapped again.

"Please," Karolina said quietly, taking her hand and lowering it so that she wouldn't tap again.

Surprised, Molly glanced at her, but Karolina was looking at Allis guiltily, like she felt embarrassed or ashamed of the way they were treating the thing that wasn't Zeke. Molly loved Karolina. All of the Runaways were her family, but Karolina was the one who sometimes seemed like real family. Now, all of a sudden, Karolina seemed more concerned about the new girl's feelings than she did about Molly's, and that sucked.

"Okay, so what do we do?" Molly demanded. "We just all stand here like a bunch of dumbasses, waiting for Nico to magically appear? And how do we know she'll appear in there with Zeke?"

Karolina said nothing about her language, and somehow that hurt Molly's feelings even more.

"We're guessing," Gert said. "When Zeke swaps his mind for the one that's using his body right now, that'll bring him into the cell. And when he comes back, he'll have Nico with him."

*If she's still alive*, Molly thought, but didn't dare say. It was an ugly thought, her nightmare still lingering in her head, and she thought that speaking it aloud might give that nightmare the strength to come true.

"Then what?" Chase asked. "We can't go back. The Nightwatch practically killed Nico, and that was without this

Abernathy guy. We're outmatched. Do we just tell Zeke it can't be done, or do we try to recruit someone else to help us?"

"Who's going to listen to us?" Gert said, brow creased in thought. "The Avengers would just tell us to stay out of it, if they'd even respond at all."

"That'll take too long, anyway," Karolina said. "If we're going to do anything, it's got to be fast. We need to get reinforcements before *they* get reinforcements. Someone here in L.A."

"Wonder Man?" Allis suggested. When Molly rolled her eyes, she shrugged. "He's the only L.A. Super Hero I know."

"We discussed him, but we don't know how to reach him," Karolina said.

"And we're not sure he's alive," Chase added.

"Oh."

Gert sighed heavily and began to pace, head down. Every few steps she'd cock her head in one direction or another, as if she'd come up with various ideas and discarded them.

"What about the Masters of Evil?" Molly suggested.

"Not now," Gert said, pacing.

"That's not what I—"

"We need to deal with the Nightwatch before we can worry about whatever the Crimson Cowl's up to," Karolina said.

"Yeah," Chase agreed. "The Masters of Evil are criminals, but if the Nightwatch pick up where our parents left off, it could put everyone on the planet in danger. They're definitely a bigger priority."

Molly stepped in front of Gert to stop her pacing. "I'm not saying we need to fight the Masters of Evil. I'm saying they could be our reinforcements."

Chase threw up his hands. "Get serious, Molly."

"I am serious."

Gert stared down at her, and Molly watched a grin spread across her face.

"That, Miss Hayes, is a fantastic idea," Gert said. Then she looked around at the others. "The Crimson Cowl wants the same thing the Nightwatch wants, to control crime in L.A. If we do it right, we can aim the Cowl at them, use her and the Masters of Evil as weapons."

Molly flushed with pride. She'd come up with the plan. Nico was supposed to be the leader, and with her out of commission, Gert had stepped in. But it had been Molly who had come up with the big idea. The trouble was she doubted it would work.

"I know, right?" she said. "It'll be great. But Karolina said we have to do it fast and it seems like this is more a long-term type of plan."

Gert reached out with both hands and adjusted the koala bear hat Molly had put on. "Nope. All we need to do is find the Masters. We'll tell them the Nightwatch are giving them an hour to leave L.A. and make sure they think it was the Nightwatch that sent us to screw up their tech heist last night. No way the Crimson Cowl is not going to come out guns blazing."

"How will the Cowl know where to find them?" Chase asked.

"We'll tell her," Molly said. The *duh* was implied in her tone.

Karolina had drifted to the back of the viewing area to stand next to Allis. They were talking quietly, privately, but it looked like Karolina was concerned about her, which Molly thought was annoying, considering Allis had never left the *Leapfrog* and the rest of them had been in danger pretty much the whole time, not to mention that Nico might be dead.

Molly shuddered. Her lower lip trembled as a wave of emotion went through her. *I can't believe I just thought that. I'm a horrible person.* She loved Nico, and desperately

needed her to be all right. Guilt washed over her and she lowered her head, barely listening to the rest of the conversation.

“So how do we find the Crimson Cowl and the rest?” Chase asked. “Whirlwind and Sunstroke and whatever the Iron Man knockoff was calling himself—”

“Blue Steel,” Molly whispered.

“No idea, Chase,” Gert said. “I figured with all of the Pride’s files and your computer wizardness, you could track them somehow.”

They all fell into a thoughtful silence. Molly glanced around at her friends—at Gert and Chase, Karolina and Allis—and she knew her great idea might have just died. It had gotten them all excited for a minute, but unless Chase could find a way to track the Cowl down, they had no next step. Her joy leaked out like helium from a punctured balloon, and she walked up to the wall of not-Zeke’s cell and stared through the not-glass at the not-boy curled up on the cot within.

*Come back, Nico*, she thought. Gert could lead, Molly didn’t doubt that. But until they knew their next step, there was nowhere to lead them.

“Someone has to keep watch here,” Gert said. “I know we have surveillance cameras, but if Nico suddenly pops back into our reality, I want someone to be here for her.”

“I’ll stay,” Molly said.

“No. I’ll take the first shift,” Gert said. “Get something to eat and get some rest.”

“Except Chase,” said Chase.

“Except Chase,” Gert echoed with a gentle smile. “Sorry, babe. Find me some Masters of Evil.”

“Losers of Evil,” Molly muttered.

Gert nodded. “Yep. Them.”

Chase saluted, blew Gert a kiss, and spun on one heel to march out of the detention block. Allis and Karolina followed.



Molly considered offering to stay with Gert, but now that the subject of food had come up, her stomach growled.

“Okay,” Molly said, with one last glance at the unconscious not-Zeke inside the cell. “Shout if something needs punching.”

She turned to go, but Gert stopped her with a hand on the shoulder. Molly turned to see her friend’s brows knitted in concern. Karolina always said it was bad to knit your brows, that it made women get early wrinkles, but Molly thought this might be a bad time to bring it up.

“Mol,” Gert said, “you know there’s more to you than just punching, right?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You’re smart...and funny and...”

“Thanks, Gert, but...this isn’t about me going to school, is it?”

“Not at all. Although I still think having us tutor you would be—”

Molly turned and marched off the way Chase had, wide awake now. “Give me a shout when it’s time for the punching.”



Karolina pulled away from Allis, their rough, urgent kisses tingling on her lips. She felt almost mesmerized, flushed and excited, her thoughts awhirl. Allis reached for her but Karolina shook her head and sat up, turned her back and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. They were fully dressed, but the way Karolina’s heart thundered and with the magnetic pull she felt toward the girl, she knew their clothes wouldn’t stay on very long if she didn’t get up now.

“What is it?” Allis asked. “Did I—”

“It’s Nico.”

She could practically feel Allis deflate beside her.

“Oh.”

“Not like that,” Karolina said, although it was halfway to a lie. Anybody could see Nico was gorgeous. A person would have to be dead not to have at least a little crush on her. But Karolina had never felt *this* way about her.

“I’m an idiot,” Allis said. “You’re worried about her. We should be focused on that and I’m being totally insensitive.”

Karolina smiled and glanced over her shoulder. She reached back and twined her fingers with Allis’s. “Not totally. I mean, a smidge, yeah, but we can make the argument that a distraction is just what a person needs when they’re worried.”

Allis glanced away, tightening her grip. “I hope I’m more than just a distraction.”

Karolina arched an eyebrow and twisted around on the bed to kiss her again, just briefly.

“So do I,” she said playfully. “But for now, we should talk. Get to know each other better.”

Allis sat up and crossed her legs, and suddenly it was an innocent girls’ sleepover. “I want to know everything about you.”

Karolina faltered. Did Allis really want to know everything? The girl had handled the reality of the Runaways and the Pride. She’d fallen into step with them as if she’d always been one of them and had wielded a plasma gun while they were trying to break Carlos and Tess out of the Nightwatch’s penthouse. Clearly, she could handle all kinds of crazy that would send a million other girls running. But what if Karolina really did tell her everything? How would Allis feel if she knew the girl she’d been kissing didn’t have super powers at all, that she could do these things because her parents came from another world? What would Allis do if Karolina told her she was an alien?

“Hey,” Allis said. “I saw that. Your eyes went all sad. What’s going on in that head?”

“Y’know what?” Karolina replied, stretching out beside her again. “I changed my mind. Let’s stick to the kissing for tonight.”

Allis pushed her fingers through Karolina’s hair and smiled as their lips touched. She made a little happy sound in her chest, like the purr of a cat.

“Turns out I’m a pretty good distraction,” she said.

Karolina didn’t answer with words.



Chase would rather have been playing video games. Ever since the truth about their parents had come out and he’d learned that some of his friends had super powers—or other talents that seemed close enough—his feelings of inadequacy had been magnified. It had been bad enough as a kid with genius parents, but in those days he’d been able to retreat to his room and sit around in yesterday’s T-shirt with a game controller in his hands. He’d numb himself, and when he finally came up for air, he’d order pizza and all would be right with the world. Then his life had changed and he’d become one of the Runaways, and the feeling that he was insufficient—that he couldn’t pull his own weight—only grew worse. In time he’d realized that he did contribute, and only recently he’d begun to really accept how good he was with machines and computers. It felt worthy. Valuable. It felt like they needed him.

But now they needed him a lot, and years spent lazing around in his underwear made it hard to adjust. Everyone else could get some rest now, have a snack, take some downtime, but Chase Stein—him, of all people—had to do his homework.

*I’d better get a pizza when this is done,* he thought.

Although there were other things he liked better than pizza. A memory of being in bed with Gert flashed through

his mind and he smiled. Suddenly being the guy they could all rely on seemed much more worthwhile.

He sat in the cavern, sliding between one computer array and the other. At one station, he was searching the Pride's extensive computer files for any reference to the Kurdogrim and the Nightwatch, hoping to find something useful that would help them defeat this Abernathy guy Gert and the others had been talking about when they'd *Leapfrogged* away from the Nightwatch's trashed penthouse.

Unfortunately, all the references the computer turned up were for heavily encrypted files. He'd broken a lot of the Pride's encryptions and he was sure he'd break these eventually—but they didn't have time for eventually.

Chase rolled his chair over to the other computer array. Several screens flashed through city surveillance cameras. He'd plugged in search parameters, scanning all references to any of the members of the Masters of Evil, using keywords and images for the Crimson Cowl, Whirlwind, Blue Steel, and Sunstroke. Given the chaos at the museum last night, the number of search results was substantial. Chase's head hurt just from skimming through the names of the search hits and the images. A small ding sounded every time the video surveillance footage showed one of them. The issue that came up was, of course, that the Cowl could teleport and all three of the others could fly, so once they'd departed the museum fiasco, they'd left no trace—not that he'd found yet, anyway.

*Aloha*, he thought. The pizza place he liked best in all of Los Angeles was at least a twenty-minute Uber, even at this time of night, but they had an aloha pizza that made him want to weep with joy at every bite. Pulled pork, barbecue sauce, three cheeses, and a thick-but-firm crust like nowhere else on earth. Worth going out for, because no way could he have them deliver to the Runaways' new secret base under the La Brea Tar Pits.

Chase stared at the computer array, at the surveillance videos that flashed by on the various screens, and then over at the other array, where the Pride's encrypted secrets about the Nightwatch seemed to mock him. It seemed like after a good run of being reliable, of being the guy who'd found them one place to crash after another, and now this new Hostel, who'd kept them safe and sheltered and sometimes fed, he was about to become the old, less-useful Chase again. Part of him hated it, and part of him wanted to fall into the lazy embrace of his old self.

"Crap," he whispered in that vast cavern.

As he felt the temptation to surrender, he started to go back through some of his favorite games in his mind, trying to decide which one would bring him the most comfort.

*Ding.*

Chase glanced up at the array. In the center screen, he saw Sunstroke. Just a glimpse at the edge of the camera frame. The bastard had flown down and landed on the curb at the corner of an alley, then hurried into the alley itself. Chase selected that screen and backed up the video, watched Sunstroke land again, then paused and stared at the frozen image. His eyes narrowed as he sat forward, curious because he recognized the building behind Sunstroke, even recognized that alley mouth. He glanced at the time code on the surveillance video, pulse quickening. He'd worked it out—he'd found them.

Only he hadn't.

The Pride had been in control of crime in Los Angeles, which meant they had a lot of nasty tentacles inside the police department, too. Setting up access to the city's surveillance system had been simple enough for them, and it had taken Chase no time at all to program this search using an advanced visual recognition program. The trouble was he'd set it to run backward from the most recent sighting, which meant the one he was looking at now had been two days ago, and he knew where Sunstroke had been

headed—to the Los Hermanos Hospital, the abandoned insane-asylum-slash-S.H.I.E.L.D.-slash-Hydra base where the Runaways had been squatting. The video was from the day Sunstroke had attacked them.

“Useless,” Chase muttered.

Sighing, he leaned back in the chair and stared at that frozen image. Sunstroke had screwed them out of a pretty decent base. Not as cool as this one, granted, but it was closer to the place with the aloha pizza. Plus he had left a cache of his favorite video games behind at the nuthouse. Now it was too risky to retrieve them.

“Dick,” he said, still staring at that image of Sunstroke. “I wish we’d never called the cops.”

The next time he saw Sunstroke, he intended to fire up the new Fistigons whether they were ready or not and blast the asshole through a wall. How the Crimson Cowl had gotten him out of police custody so fast was no mystery. With that Cowl, the woman could teleport. She must’ve popped into his jail cell and just zapped him right out of there.

Chase frowned, staring at that frozen image of the guy who’d cost him his favorite games. There were surveillance cameras all through the police station. If the Crimson Cowl had appeared there, the video would have shown up with the search he was currently running using the Pride’s crime-monitoring program. In fact, Sunstroke would have shown up when they’d brought him into the station to begin with, but Chase had seen no sign of any such video. Which meant...

“I’m an idiot.”

To be fair, they’d all been idiots, too distracted by the Nightwatch’s desire to replace the Pride to focus on the Crimson Cowl.

Chase smiled. Maybe he was going to get his video games back after all.



Molly headed for the kitchen. She'd noticed blueberry Pop-Tarts in a cabinet there. Her dad had liked to sneak a Pop-Tart once in a while, so Molly thought the box in the kitchen must have been his, once. They'd be pretty old now, definitely past their sell-by date, but they did come sealed inside those little silver bags, so maybe they'd still be edible once they were toasted. Maybe. She wanted to find out.

Molly didn't miss her father. She always told herself that she didn't miss her parents at all. They'd pretended to be nice and good and they'd turned out to be total jerks. But she had so many memories of them when they were pretending, so many memories that were nice and good, including the times her mom would go up to bed early and her dad would let her stay up and watch TV with him and they would both sneak late-night blueberry Pop-Tarts. Her dad had liked them extra toasted, but Molly liked hers just warmed up, not crunchy, and he would always take hers out early so it would be just the way she liked it, even though it meant he had to put his own Pop-Tart back into the toaster. Sometimes—like now, when she was tired and hungry and scared that Nico might not come back—she liked to tell herself that in moments like that her dad hadn't been pretending. That the nice moments had been real.

She needed that.

Even more than she needed a Pop-Tart.



When Nico popped back into reality, Gert spent the first few seconds blinking and staring, just to make sure she was real. She'd sat herself down several minutes earlier to try to get comfortable while she stood watch, and now she leaped up again.

“Wow,” she muttered to herself. Then she launched herself forward and slapped the see-through partition. “Nico! Is that you?”

Gert slapped the partition again, bouncing on her heels. Nico was back, but was she alive? Was she breathing? She lay on the floor of the cell in a tangle of limbs, like a doll cast aside by some bratty kid. Gert couldn’t make out whether or not her chest rose and fell. All she could see was the wild mess of her hair. Only part of the left side of Nico’s face was visible, but her makeup looked smudged and streaked.

*Damn it, is she alive?*

Gert had to go inside. Even if Nico had survived, if Zeke had helped her somehow, she’d need help. A row of fat red buttons was arranged inside a metal box on the wall. Each button was an emergency release on one of the cell doors, and Gert stared at the one that would unlock Zeke’s cell. She raised her hand, let it hover near the button.

Zeke hadn’t stirred. Nico had come back, yeah, but what if the Zeke inside the cell still had a Kurdogrim inside him? Gert was alone here. What if the figure lying on that cot with his back to her was a monster hiding inside a human being? They’d theorized that if Nico reappeared it would be because Zeke had brought her back, that he’d be inside his own body again, but she couldn’t be sure.

The intercom panel was on the wall a dozen feet away, at the entrance to this viewing area outside Zeke’s cell. She needed to call for backup, get Chase or Karolina or Molly down here, have them bring Old Lace with them, but every second might be another second that Nico spent dying.

Something shifted inside the cell. Gert stared, wondering for a moment if she’d imagined it, and then Nico moved again. Dragged herself closer to the base of the cot, pulling herself into a fetal position. Where she’d been lying, blood streaked the floor.



“No,” Gert said, hating herself for the moments she’d already wasted.

She hit the red button. The door swooshed open and she rushed in, calling to Nico. She dropped to her knees beside her friend, so many fears clashing in her thoughts. On the cot, Zeke shifted, groaned, turned and sat up quickly.

Gert jumped away from them. On her feet, she raised her fists and dropped into a combat stance.

“Zeke, is that you?” she demanded, ready to kick his ass. She might not have super strength, but she’d learned how to throw a punch.

He groaned again. “Who do you think?” he asked, and then he met her gaze, saw the suspicion there, and his face lit with understanding. “Ah, right. Sorry. Yes, it’s me. The Kurdogrim’s gone for now. How’s Nico? Is she talking?”

Gert scowled.

“I don’t know!” she snapped as she dropped to her knees again. The wound in Nico’s chest had been bleeding copiously, so it made sense that her shirt was soaked with blood. The sword had punched all the way through her, but now that Gert was so close she saw that Nico was breathing evenly. A little fast, but evenly.

“Nico,” Zeke said, slipping off the bed to join Gert on his knees. “You still with us?”

Gert shook her shoulder gently. Nico moaned and batted at her hand, but when Gert tried again, she rolled onto her back, face scrunched in pain.

“Stop,” Nico rasped.

Gert barely heard her, distracted by the rip in the front of Nico’s shirt. She could see a portion of the wound. Blood caked its edges but it was closed, healed over with gleaming pink skin. *You did it*, she wanted to say to Zeke, as her heart leaped. *You really did it!*

“Nico,” Gert said. “Can you hear me? Are you going to be okay?”

“Honestly? I don’t know,” Nico said quietly. Then she leveraged herself up into a sitting position, the Staff of One across her lap. Bleary-eyed and weak, she focused on Gert. “But if you get me a big-ass cup of coffee, I might have a better answer for you.”

Gert laughed out loud and hugged her. Not too tightly—she didn’t know how hurt Nico might still be, and they had never been the huggy type. Even so, when she stood up straight, she turned and threw her arms around Zeke, who’d been standing anxiously behind her.

“Oh...kay,” Zeke said.

“Thank you,” Gert said, hugging him more tightly. “I don’t know how you did it, but thank you so much. We need this bitch in one piece.”

Zeke hugged her back. It lasted a moment or two longer than it should have.

Gert heard someone clearing their throat and glanced up to see Chase standing in the open doorway. She fought the urge to jerk away from Zeke like touching him burned her skin. That would only have made it look as if she’d done something wrong, and she knew she hadn’t, although the pinched, hurt look on her boyfriend’s face spoke volumes about how much he disagreed with her.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he began.

“Chase...”

“I’ve found the Masters of Evil. At least I think I have,” he said, gaze locked on her, as if Zeke and Nico weren’t even in the room.

“The Masters?” Zeke asked.

“Long story,” Gert said. She started across the cell toward Chase. “Nico’s back. Alive.”

“I see that,” Chase said. “Look, I just thought you’d want to know. Short version is that Sunstroke didn’t get sprung from police custody. He was never in police custody at all.”

“But we called,” Gert said.

“Yeah. The Crimson Cowl must have some people inside LAPD, because they never responded. Sunstroke was never arrested. The S.H.I.E.L.D. base under Los Hermanos was never seized.”

Gert nodded, halting half a dozen steps from him. “Of course. Sunstroke was there to claim the base for her in the first place. You think that’s where they are.”

“I’d bet on it,” Chase said, finally glancing at Zeke. “We should get moving.”

Chase turned and left. Gert called after him but he kept going. She watched through the transparent partition, thinking he would respond to her calling his name, that he’d turn or at least pause, but he didn’t even glance back.

Her shoulders drooped. “Shit.”

“Gert?” Nico said, still dazed. “Do you think he’s going to get me some coffee?”

When Gert turned to reply, Nico had passed out on the floor.

They were about to start a fight between two groups of super-powered criminals, and then hurl themselves into the middle of it. Gert would have laughed if she hadn’t been so terrified.



## FOURTEEN

**N**ico held on to the seat harness across her chest and promised herself she wouldn't puke. The *Leapfrog* hurtled forward and she felt bile rise in the back of her throat. Still dizzy and disoriented, she felt like someone had filled her head with cotton and her stomach with rancid chili. She breathed through her nose and kept it together, though barely. The two massive cups of coffee she'd had now seemed like a terrible idea. Her body ached like she'd just done a triathlon and the new skin itched where it had formed over the place where Emilio Ochoa had run her through with his sword.

The *Leapfrog* lurched again. Nico gripped the seat belt harder and closed her eyes, then opened them again immediately when she realized that only made it worse. Part of her still felt as if she were in that smoky limbo where the Kurdogrim lived, the weird little pocket dimension where she'd heard them chanting, heard them shouting at Zeke in that language that sounded more like the night sounds of the jungle than words. What did they say? The memory

nagged at her. But the more she tried to grasp it, the further it pulled away. She did remember the cold that had radiated out from her wound and the way that gaping, bleeding hole had made her feel more vulnerable than she'd ever felt. She'd felt helpless, knowing that she would die. Now she had to fight.

The *Leapfrog* lurched again, then it jerked to one side with a boom and the starboard side of the little ship's hull brightened with heat and a flicker of small flames that danced along the inside of the metal like droplets of condensation on a glass of water.

"Chase!" Karolina called from the seat behind Nico. "We can't withstand too many of those!"

"I'm doing my—" Chase began, but he swore as he plunged the controls forward and the *Leapfrog* dropped almost straight down.

From her seat, Nico saw a blast of fire burn across the night sky. Had Chase not avoided it, the *Frog* would've been toast. They alighted on a building and immediately lunged forward again, this time to the right, and Chase hit the switch for what he always called "the burners," which gave the engine a boost.

Screens in the back showed just how screwed they were. Sunstroke, Whirlwind, and Blue Steel were all flying in pursuit. Last time they'd seen Sunstroke, at the fake museum heist, he'd had a broken arm and a bullet wound in his shoulder. *Tough bastard*, Nico thought. She had to give him credit for that, at least. Where the Crimson Cowl had gone, she had no idea, but she had no doubt they'd be seeing the woman again soon.

Blue Steel fired some kind of energy blast from both hands, but Chase dodged it. Whatever damage had been done to Blue Steel's suit seemed mostly repaired.

"Gert, this was a terrible plan," Nico said, her words coming out a little slurred, as if she'd been drinking too much instead of nearly dying.

"We didn't have time for a good one," Gert replied. "We all agreed on fast instead of subtle."

"I had a good plan," Molly muttered.

"A joke about a burning bag of poop on their doorstep is not a 'good plan,'" Zeke said.

Molly scowled at him. "Who says I was joking?"

"You don't know her," Karolina told him.

Allis laughed, but Nico knew Molly had only been half kidding. They hadn't had time for jokes and they certainly didn't have time to be clever. Zeke insisted the Nightwatch would still be at the hotel, that it had only been a couple of hours and they wouldn't be moving from their lair unless they absolutely had to. Given the influence they might wield inside the police department, Nico thought it was possible they'd been allowed to stay, but only possible. The alternative worried her a great deal, especially since they were already 100 percent committed to their plan, as illustrated by the Masters of Evil currently set on murdering them.

Chase had fired the *Leapfrog's* lasers at Los Hermanos Hospital, knocked down half of the place and the fence around it. There'd been fire and smoke enough to alert the whole neighborhood, which would draw the fire department and police, no matter how many cops the Crimson Cowl had on her payroll. The Runaways had just screwed the Masters of Evil out of their new base, and the Masters of Evil were not happy. Nico would think it funny how much they had messed with the Cowl's plans the past couple of days if not for the fear that they were about to be incinerated or obliterated.

Gert slipped up to the cockpit and strapped into the seat beside Chase. "Calling the police," she said.

"It's risky," Zeke warned.

"Not as risky as the other option," Gert said.

Nico agreed. Her brain had been in and out of focus over the past hour, so her recollection of the conversation was

spotty, but Gert had argued that they couldn't attack again unless they were sure the Trumbull Bel Air had been evacuated and that innocent people wouldn't be hurt on the street below. They'd gotten some answers from official police statements on social media—yes, the Trumbull Bel Air Hotel had officially been evacuated and the cops and emergency services had set up a cordon at a same distance around it. There were at least a dozen police officers on duty to keep people away from the site for the night. All of the glass in the street had to be picked up, and they had to make sure the building didn't have any structural damage. But there was no way to know if people would be out for a run or walking the dogs or if there might be homeless people around.

It was the middle of the night. Most people were off the streets. That had to be good enough.

The *Leapfrog* descended. A blast of energy from Blue Steel zipped past the cockpit window. The *Frog* started to judder in the air, engines whining.

"Hold tight! It's Whirlwind," Chase called from the cockpit.

Nico gripped her harness. She glanced around at the others. Karolina and Allis sat together. Gert hugged Old Lace to keep the dino calm. Molly looked terrified. Zeke stared coolly back at Nico as if to assure her they were going to be okay, but she didn't know this kid. She wanted the staff in her hand. In the pocket of her tight black lace coat, the thing she'd pulled on to replace her bloody clothes, she had put a thumbtack. That was all it would take to make her bleed so that she could summon her staff. She wasn't in the mood to cut herself open after having a sword impale her, so the thumbtack would have to be enough.

"Chase, we can't die yet," Nico said.

"Working on it!"

She slid a hand into that pocket, found the little plastic thumbtack, and held on to it as the *Leapfrog* shuddered and

began to jerk to the left, as if it had started to slip sideways on the air...or into a whirlwind.

"Chase!" Gert shouted.

The *Leapfrog* began to descend. "We're here!"

Nico watched him in the cockpit, saw the way he focused. Through the windshield she caught sight of the hotel. The top-floor windows on this side had been completely blown out, and she shivered as she remembered being in that room. She'd been standing not far from those floor-to-ceiling windows, the open drop to the street, when Emilio had tried to kill her.

"Do it!" Nico snapped.

Chase fired the *Leapfrog's* lasers. The top floor of the Trumbull Bel Air erupted with small explosions. The walls and windows on the next floor down blew out like a Michael Bay wet dream.

"Go stealth!" Nico ordered.

"I guess she's back in charge," Gert said.

"Already on it," Chase replied.

He tapped the controls and the *Leapfrog* vibrated just slightly as stealth mode kicked in. With the ship invisible, he jerked the stick to the right and diverted slightly. A flash of fire fried the sky where they'd just been, and Chase set them down ever so gently on top of the same office building they'd used earlier to get a look at the hotel.

"You sure the police will hear this?" Gert asked.

Chase shrugged. "It's the frequency they were using an hour ago."

Gert put on a headset. "Attention, police officers working the Trumbull Hotel site, move farther back from the building. The shit's about to hit the fan."

She clicked off.

"That's it?" Karolina called up to Gert.

"What else do they need to know?" Molly replied.

Gert tapped a few buttons on the intercom, and suddenly Nico felt a familiar buzz at the base of her brain. It made her



even queasier, made her skin crawl, made her want to jump out of the *Leapfrog* just to get away from it. The aversion signal from the S.H.I.E.L.D. base had been a great invention, and it worked even better now that Chase had tinkered with it.

"The cops are scrambling back from the barrier!" Chase said.

Molly clapped her hands together. "Let's get this done."

"Quietly from here on," Karolina reminded her. "Let the evil grown-ups beat each other up while we sneak in, get Carlos and Tess, and sneak back out."

Molly shrugged. "I know I'm usually happy to get in a fight. I like the look on bad guys' faces when they realize the little girl can kick their butts. But at this point I would like to sleep for three days straight, so whatever makes that happen is okay with me."

Nico smiled. She unsnapped her harness and hustled up to the cockpit, kneeling behind Chase and Gert. They were in stealth mode, so it felt like they were spying. She knelt there, the queasiness finally starting to fade in her gut, and she watched as the action unfolded outside. Whirlwind and Blue Steel were flying back and forth overhead in search of the *Leapfrog*, but Sunstroke had zipped over to the side of the hotel. His armor would be holding everything together, but he had to be in excruciating pain with that broken arm. He hung in the air, flames burning around him, and seemed to be examining the ruined windows and walls. The Runaways had led the Masters of Evil to the fight...now they just had to hope the Nightwatch reacted the way Zeke had predicted.

Nico watched as a figure appeared inside the penthouse, her hair blowing in the wind as she stood exposed, right at the edge, nothing keeping her from a fall to her death.

"Zeke," Nico said, "I see your mother."

"Me too," he quietly replied, and she jumped a little, unaware that he'd come up to stand behind her, half-bent to

avoid bumping his head.

They fell silent then and watched.

Kathryn Zheng reached out a hand. She seemed to call to Sunstroke, and then she made a fist and pulled back on nothing but air, but it seemed like invisible strings were attached to the fire around Sunstroke and Kathryn was the puppeteer. She dragged at the fire, twirled her fingers until it reached her hand. Sunstroke jerked in midair, then pulled back angrily. She couldn't take the fire away, not all of it, but Kathryn warped and twisted it with nothing but hand gestures, and then she blew Sunstroke across the street and through the side of a gleaming international bank headquarters. Alarms went off, but they were tinny and distant.

"I told you she was an elemental," Zeke said, almost proudly.

Nico cried out when Blue Steel blasted Kathryn with an energy beam that threw her backward into the darkness of the ruined penthouse.

"It seems wrong to just sit here," Chase said.

"We're not just sitting," Allis reminded them all. "We're waiting."

Nico glanced over her shoulder at the girl. Allis remained buckled in, ready for whatever came next. She had a pulse gun that Chase had made and wore it in a holster on her hip, as if she'd been trained for this, as if she knew the first thing about being a hero. Nobody else appeared to have a problem with it. Karolina seemed thrilled to have the girl there. It was obvious they'd hit it off. Nico wanted Karolina to be happy, and if Allis turned out to be quality girlfriend material, she'd be the first one to cheer the couple on. What troubled her was that Karolina acted like she thought Allis would become part of the team. Or that she was part of the team already. When this was over, Nico needed to call a meeting about that. But now wasn't the time.

Rosie and Emilio Ochoa appeared on the next floor down, him in black linen pants and a T-shirt and her in a long nightshirt that flapped in the wind. It appeared they'd been sleeping when Chase had blasted the facade of the hotel, but now they stood in the hole blown in the side of the building. Emilio brandished his sword, glancing around, ready for a fight. Rosie pointed at something and Nico glanced over to see Whirlwind arcing down toward them. He'd spotted them, too. Rosie shape-shifted into a massive mountain gorilla, hunched over, so much larger than her husband.

Neither of them saw the Crimson Cowl materialize behind them.

"There she is!" Gert said.

Emilio sensed the Cowl somehow, turned with his sword, and her cloak coiled around the blade and wrenched it from his grasp, tossing it aside. The Cowl grabbed Emilio and leaped out through the hole. The cloak wrapped itself around them as they fell. Emilio vanished from her grasp, then reappeared higher in the air, then teleported again and reappeared standing beside the gorilla inside the ruined face of the hotel. The Crimson Cowl popped out of reality a moment, vanished from the midst of her death-fall, then appeared again beside Emilio. The cloak wrapped around his neck, choking him, throttling him as she dove out into open air once more. This time as she fell, she dragged him with her as if the cowl was a hangman's noose. Emilio flailed, but didn't seem able to teleport away.

The gorilla roared and leaped out after them. In midair, Rosie shape-shifted. Her flesh seemed to flex for an instant, and then gorilla became hawk, and the hawk flew straight down in pursuit of its prey.

Whirlwind diverted, heading after his boss. He didn't see the bald man who appeared in the shadows of the ruined windows of Kathryn Zheng's suite. The man looked as if he'd just stepped out of a 1950s movie, with a short-sleeved,

button-down white shirt, a skinny black tie, and nerdy black glasses.

"Who the hell is that?" Chase asked.

"Abernathy," Zeke said.

Gert stared. "*That's* Abernathy?"

Even as she said his name, Abernathy stepped out into nothing. Unlike the others, he didn't fall. His legs moved as if he were walking down a set of stairs, but with every step he seemed to descend a dozen feet. He reached out, made a fist, and smashed it down on the same air that held him aloft. Thirty yards away and twenty below him, Whirlwind dropped.

*Not dropped*, Nico thought. *He got slammed. Abernathy smashed him with his mind.*

In a single, swift motion, Whirlwind crashed to the street, shattering the pavement next to a police car. Two cops rushed out to cover him, weapons drawn, but a moment later they saw Abernathy descending and aimed at him. With a gesture of his hand, the telekinetic swept them away.

"Holy crap," Chase said.

"Gawk later," Nico said, tapping his shoulder. "We won't get a better shot than this. Let's go right now."

Chase nodded, tapped a single button, and grabbed the steering column with both hands. The *Leapfrog* surged upward, jumped, and seconds later they were settling again on top of the Trumbull Bel Air, right behind that same billboard where they'd parked before. Déjà vu.

The hatch hissed open. Nico turned to see Karolina and Zeke exiting, with Molly and Allis right behind them.

"Allis should stay with the *Frog*," Gert said.

"Agreed," Nico replied. "Try telling her that."

Chase touched her arm. "You sure you're up to this, Nico? You almost died tonight."

Nico smiled. She reached into her pocket and pricked herself with that thumbtack and the Staff of One slid easily from inside her chest.

"I'm good," she promised, drawing out the staff. "Trust me. The witch is back."



Karolina led the way down through the hole in the roof. There were no guards and most of the Nightwatch were down in the street. Nobody attempted to stop them as they rushed past the ruined elevator shaft. The last time they'd gone to the left, into the private suite of Kathryn Zheng, but now they had a different goal in mind. They ran past the elevator shaft, moving parallel to the corridor in Kathryn's suite. Fifty feet or so down the hall Karolina began to slow and glanced over her shoulder.

"Gert, you studied the blueprint. Where do you think—?"

"Right there. Maybe another six feet, to be safe," Gert said.

The others crowded the hallway as Karolina came to a halt. She turned to the bare wall on her left—the one the blueprint showed was the *rear* wall of the room where Tess had been imprisoned. If they couldn't go through the front door, there were other ways in.

"Do it," Zeke said. "No telling how much time we'll have."

Nico nudged him. "Give the girl room to work. Everybody, back up."

Karolina waited as Gert and Nico herded Molly, Old Lace, Zeke, and Allis away. It was so weird having Allis with them—weird but nice. Things were moving quickly, and Karolina knew she and Allis were going to need to have a long conversation when this was over. Their flirtation had become more than that, and she wanted to know how much more. Allis caught her eye, almost on cue, and smiled mischievously.

Focusing, she glanced at Molly. "You ready?"

“When you need me.” Molly stood a bit straighter, impatient as ever.

Karolina held up both hands. Swirling colors turned to solid light and she released a punishing laser blast at the wall. The light came from the solar radiation she absorbed during the day, stored in the cells of her body, and Karolina always felt a connection to that light as if it were an extension of herself. She knew the moment the laser blast struck the wall that the structure would yield to her. Mustering more power, she launched another attack, poured it on, and the plaster and wood began to burn. Focusing, Karolina burned a massive oval in the wall and it collapsed outward, crashing to the tiled floor of the corridor. The edges of the hole were charred black and smoking, flickering with little bits of flame.

But the hole she’d opened only went so deep. A foot further in there was a concrete surface.

“Molly,” Karolina said. “You’re up.”

Without a word, Molly ran at the wall, leaped, and threw a punch that even the Hulk would have felt. Concrete shards exploded out of the hole...revealing a layer of steel. Karolina glanced at Molly, but the younger girl only smiled, happy for the challenge. Molly punched again. The strike barely made a dent—but it *did* make a dent, and so Molly kept punching.

“Hang on,” Karolina said. “Let’s take turns. I can soften it up for you.”

Karolina pointed a finger at the deepening dent and hit it with a laser that began to burn through the metal.

“It’s working,” Zeke said. “But we have to hurry.”

“Don’t you think we know?” Molly snapped at him as she hammered on the wall again.

The partially melted steel began to crack, but it wasn’t yielding fast enough for Molly. She took a step back to let Karolina continue. Wondering how long her solar reserves would last tonight, Karolina took aim at the crack in the dented steel, but a chill wind blew across the back of her

neck. Even before she heard the others start to shout, she knew what it meant.

Spinning, Karolina threw up a curtain of sizzling colors and forged them into a shield, which held only a moment before the icy air burst through. Ice formed on her arms and face as the wind blasted her into Molly, and the two of them blew backward into their friends. They hit the floor in a tumble of arms and legs. Karolina's head smacked the tile and she saw stars. For a few seconds, everything went black, and when consciousness returned they were all trying to stand as a blizzard raged in the hallway.

"I swear," Kathryn said, "I never thought the Pride's children would be so foolish."

Old Lace roared and lunged, plowing through the wind and the blizzard. Karolina caught a glimpse through the indoor snowstorm of the look of terror on Kathryn's face before thunder shook the whole building and lightning arced along the corridor and lit up Old Lace from within. The dinosaur screamed. Gert shrieked in sympathetic agony and crumbled to the ground. Karolina had never heard sounds so dreadful, but although Old Lace staggered, the dinosaur kept going. Smoke puffed from her nostrils and her open jaws as she lunged for Kathryn, who turned all the focus of her snowstorm on Old Lace and turned her into a bizarre ice sculpture.

Fuming, Kathryn spun on the rest of them.

"My son's problem," she said, "is that he always assumes he's the smartest one in the room, when really he's a baby throwing a tantrum."

In that quiet moment, just before the battle would begin again, Allis aimed the plasma pistol Chase had given her and shot Kathryn in the chest. The energy blasted her backward, but whatever magic or mutation gave Kathryn Zheng her powers, they were more than elemental, because though the pulse knocked her back a few steps, she remained on her feet.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Zeke said, although he didn’t sound sorry. “You brought this on yourself.”

He muttered that same guttural phrase in that ancient tongue. The air in the hallway seemed to flex and darken and then Zeke’s body was gone, the Kurdogrim in its place.

Kathryn stared at him—her fourteen-foot son hunched over in the corridor, bloody ax in hand, locked inside the wine-red, leather-gnarled body of an elder god.

“I still can’t believe the depth of your betrayal,” she sneered. “Look at you.”

Kurdo-Zeke reached for his mother, grabbed her by the throat with one massive hand, and smashed her against the tile floor.

Kurdo-Zeke lifted the ax. Kathryn’s eyes went wide. Karolina stared at the blood on the cruel edge of that ax and she knew she couldn’t stand by and let this happen, couldn’t let Zeke murder his mother. Couldn’t let him live with that.

“Nico!” she shouted.

“I’m on it!” Nico said, pushing between Karolina and Molly and past the ice-packed form of Old Lace. She held up the Staff of One. *“Go Play with Your Friends.”*

Kathryn Zheng vanished just as the ax came down and shattered the tile floor.

Kurdo-Zeke spun on Nico, face etched with fury. “What the hell did you just do?”

“Stopped you from killing your mother!”

Karolina stepped between them as Kurdo-Zeke and Nico seemed about to come to blows. Molly, Gert, and Allis had started smashing the ice and snow away from Old Lace, and they’d cracked off enough of it that the dinosaur had started breaking herself loose, shaking away the cocoon of ice like a dog shaking off water.

“Where is she, Nico?” Zeke growled in his Kurdogrim voice, backing off slightly, perhaps realizing they were supposed to be on the same side.



“Down on the street with the rest of them,” Nico said, and then she dropped her head. “Which means...shit! The others are going to know we’re up here.”

“Good job,” Kurdo-Zeke rumbled. “For your information, I planted that ax right next to where her head *would* have been. I wasn’t about to split my mother’s skull.”

Old Lace hissed at him, unafraid despite the size difference between them and the fact that Zeke smelled like a Kurdogrim. Karolina frowned. She’d seen where the ax had smashed the tiles, and she thought that if Zeke hadn’t meant to kill Kathryn, he had misjudged that blow, because it would have cracked her head in two.

Molly smashed her fist into the cracked steel plating separating them from the prison-room. She pounded the metal again and again. With a shrieking of metal, the plating began to tear.

Old Lace snarled at Zeke again.

“Gert, can you get your bitch to heel?”

Karolina saw Gert flinch.

“I guess you can turn the charm on and off,” Gert said. “But it’s definitely off right now. I can handle you whipping out your attitude to my friends, because they have their own voices. They can speak for themselves. But Old Lace can’t speak. If I let her deal with your crap *her* way, she’ll eat your face.”

Kurdo-Zeke swallowed his pride. Karolina saw it happen, saw the big, ugly Kurdogrim face turn from angry and arrogant to sad and frustrated.

“Gert, I’m sorry,” he said.

And he did sound sorry. Any other time, Karolina would have been curious about Gert’s reply, but Molly had stopped pounding on the steel. Shoving her hands into the crack, Molly peeled the three-inch-thick steel plating open like it was aluminum foil. Now that the girl had leverage, the metal tore with a terrible grinding noise, and then they were all

staring in through the ruined wall at the two faces that peered out.

Carlos they already knew. His sister Tess had a thick head of copper-tinted brown hair and an infectious grin. Tess jumped through the hole, wrapped her arms around Molly, and kissed her on the top of her koala bear hat. Then she went to Zeke and punched the Kurdogrim giant in the chest.

"Ow," Kurdo-Zeke rumbled. It seemed ridiculous, and Karolina thought it was mostly his pride that had been hurt.

"Took you long enough," Tess chided him. Then she turned to take in the rest of the group, scanning Karolina, Allis, Molly, Gert, and Old Lace. Her eyes widened a bit when Old Lace sniffed her, but she didn't seem frightened. "Carlos and I are grateful you came to get us...particularly that you came *back* to get us. I blame Zeke that it didn't go well the first time."

Gert smirked. "Oh, I like this one."

Nico tapped the comms unit in her ear. "Chase, we're on the move." Then she turned to Carlos and Tess. "Originally, our plan was to snatch you guys and take off. But we've got an opportunity right now. We tricked the Masters of Evil into assaulting your parents. If Zeke is right and they intend to kill you—and us, for that matter—we can't afford to leave them running around free. The Nightwatch might be too much for us, but the Masters—"

"Losers," Molly interrupted.

"Yes, the Losers of Evil," Nico went on, "are definitely going to make things interesting for them. They might even win. I propose we hit the street and take them all down."

"Agreed," Carlos said, radiating fury. "This has to end. I'm not going to be caged again."

"I get it!" Molly said amiably. "'Caged,' because you shape-shift into animals and stuff!"

Carlos shot her a withering look, which Molly happily ignored.

Karolina turned to Kurdo-Zeke. "I want to be clear on this—we're not going to kill them. We're going to capture and expose them and turn them over to the police."

"That's ridiculous!" Zeke said, glancing around for support and finding none. "They'll escape ten minutes after we've handed them over."

"We'll make sure that doesn't happen," Nico said.

Molly nodded emphatically and crossed her arms. "We'll call the Avengers, or maybe even S.H.I.E.L.D."

"One or the other," Karolina said. "Too many of those guys and things get complicated."

Even Zeke agreed, though with obvious reluctance. He muttered his guttural incantation and swapped back to his human body, knowing the *Leapfrog* would be jammed with all of them in there.

Nico turned toward Tess and Carlos. "Now that you're free, what've we got for weapons? What are your powers?"

Carlos shrugged. "Told you guys before, I'm a shape-shifter, like my mother."

Gert looked at Tess. "So are you a teleporter like your dad?"

Tess reached her hand out with a flourish, and her arm vanished up to the elbow. For half a second Karolina thought all of her would disappear, and then she saw the way the air shimmered around Tess's arm. Tess grinned, reached a little further into nothingness, and then pulled her hand back out of wherever it had been, now holding a massive broadsword with a silver handle and a blade made entirely of fire.

"Oh, that's cool!" Molly said. "That's your power? Fire Sword Girl or something?"

Tess nodded slowly. "Or something. I have access to a kind of pocket dimension where thousands of nasty weapons are stored. Mystical, alien, future science. The coolest crap you've ever seen. Some of them are harder to get than others, but this one..." She brandished the fire sword again. "This is my favorite."

Karolina couldn't help but like her.

"That'll come in handy," Nico said. "All right, everyone. Let's move. Stay together. Fight together. Cover each other's backs. And remember, no killing."

They started back along the corridor, made it to the pile of debris from the fallen ceiling, and started climbing. Karolina hung back, waited to make sure they all got up safely, and then followed. Out on the roof, in the glare of that neon sign, she could hear the noise from the battle far below. Police sirens wailed in the distance. Gunshots rang out. Something shattered.

Allis waited for her at the *Leapfrog's* hatch. She looked scared, and though the girl had acquitted herself well against Kathryn Zheng, Karolina wished they had left Allis behind at the Hostel.

"You okay?" Karolina asked, pausing outside the *Leapfrog* to take the girl's hand.

"I think so," Allis replied. "I just...it would be so much easier to kill the Nightwatch than to capture them. If that's what Zeke and the others want to do, why would you want to stop it? I mean, you didn't do it on purpose, but you and your friends basically killed your own parents."

Karolina felt a terrible pang in her heart.

"That's true," she said. "And you're right, it would be easier...which is tempting. But no matter how evil our parents were, it's a horrible thing to have to live with. That's why we'll do whatever we can to make sure Zeke and his friends don't end up the same way."

"So if Zeke tries to kill his mother again, you'll stop him?"

Karolina squeezed her hand. "I'll try."

Molly poked her head out of the hatch. "You guys, come on! We need to move or it'll be over before we get there!"

Karolina and Allis climbed inside, closed the hatch, and buckled into their seats. As Chase and Nico strategized, all Karolina could think of was Molly's words: *It'll be over before we get there*, she'd said.

But Karolina knew they wouldn't be that lucky. They were the Runaways, after all. Even when it seemed like they had it all under control, things had a habit of going horribly, horribly wrong.



## FIFTEEN

**C**hase kept the *Leapfrog* in stealth mode as they dropped toward the street. Whirlwind and Kathryn were in combat below, sending gusts and small tornado-updrafts their way. The *Frog* blew to one side and Gert shouted his name as they nearly crashed into the side of the hotel.

“You got this, babe,” Gert said.

Chase grinned. “Easy for you to say.”

She put a hand on his thigh and squeezed. As he guided the *Leapfrog* into the side street between the hotel and an apartment building, he felt the faith she had in him and the connection they shared. A blast of hurricane-force wind blew down the street but he kept the *Frog* steady, guided it between an overturned SUV and an abandoned UPS truck. The *Frog’s* legs reached, touched ground, and settled with a hiss.

“Nicely done,” Gert said, before kissing him on the cheek.

“I know, right?”

“Hold the applause,” Nico said, as they all unbuckled themselves and started to rise. “If we’re doing this, we go in hard and fast. If we can’t beat them in the first few minutes after contact, then we can’t beat them and we retreat.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Zeke said.

Carlos and Tess glanced at one another but didn’t take sides.

“You don’t have to retreat,” Nico told Zeke, “but the Runaways are dusting off as soon as I give the signal. You and the rest of Nightwatch Junior are free to do what you—”

Tess went at Nico. Toe to toe, she glared in Nico’s face. “Don’t call us that. We’re not that, not ever.”

Chase took Gert’s hand, not wanting her to get in the middle. When Tess had climbed into the *Leapfrog* she’d had a flaming sword in her hand. Chase had made her put it away, but he remembered the size of the thing and the heat coming off its flames. Helping Zeke and his friends had rapidly turned into a seemed-like-a-good-idea-at-the-time sort of thing.

“She’s right,” Karolina said.

“I agree,” Allis piped up. “Imagine if they called you ‘Pride Junior.’”

Nico kept her gaze locked on Tess’s. “Fine. But I’m not letting my team gamble their lives on a lost cause. If it looks like it’s falling apart, we are getting the hell out of here.”

She pushed past Tess, slammed the button for the hatch, which hissed open. They started pouring out of the cramped space. Nico and Molly were the first ones off, then Karolina and Allis. Zeke, Carlos, and Tess followed, with Old Lace sniffing after them and growling low in her throat.

“What’s her deal?” Chase asked, when he and Gert were the only ones left in the now-quiet *Leapfrog*.

“Old Lace? I don’t know. She’s on edge. Spoiling for a fight today, like Molly.”

“I meant Allis. It’s like all of a sudden she thinks she’s one of us.”

"I have an idea about that, but it's none of my business," Gert said.

Chase frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means it's none of my business. What I will say is that Allis seems like the kind of girl who's been waiting her whole life to be able to fight back against whatever she's had to deal with in her past. Oh, and let's not forget, you're the one who gave her a plasma pistol and told her she could join the fight."

"That was for self-defense, not for an all-out assault!" Chase said.

Gert whistled and Old Lace popped her head back through the hatch. The dinosaur was waiting for them. Chase opened a panel in the rear of the *Leapfrog* and pulled out a pair of oversize, weaponized gloves.

"The new Fistigons are ready?" Gert asked.

"I sure as hell hope so," Chase replied, pulling them on. "If I don't blow myself up, they should work just fine."

Old Lace hissed and they took that as their cue. Chase followed Gert out and used a remote to seal the hatch, still in stealth mode. The others were waiting impatiently behind the overturned SUV. Ice and snow whipped through the air, the result of Kathryn in battle. The ground shook as a police car struck the sidewalk across the side street and skidded into the abandoned UPS truck.

"No gunshots," Gert said.

Nico spun to look at them. "The cops have fallen back, waiting for the outcome."

"Which is what we should do," Karolina said.

Molly tugged her koala bear hat down more firmly on her head. "Screw that," she said, and marched around the wrecked SUV.

Zeke muttered that incantation again, and Kurdo-Zeke stood before them. "We ready? Once we go in, it's like Nico said. Hard and fast."



Chase clicked the Fistigons together and powered them up.

“Let’s go.”



Nico still didn’t feel right. Memories of her time in the Kurdogrim’s limbo haunted her, fleeting glimpses and echoes of images and words that seemed just at the edge of memory. Her chest still burned where Emilio Ochoa had impaled her, not with pain but with vulnerability. She felt tired and weak, but her team needed her to be something else now. Something more. They needed their leader.

“Spread out. Partner up. Get the lay of the land. Keep your comms open,” she said. “Molly, you’re with me.”

“I’m here,” Molly confirmed, but otherwise she kept unusually quiet, as if the danger they were in had sunk in for once. Nico thought maybe Molly had started to grow up, and it saddened her.

They swept around the corner and into the main street in front of the hotel. All ten of them—Allis, five Runaways, three Nightwatch kids, and a smallish dinosaur, looking for trouble. Kurdo-Zeke bent and hustled over behind an upturned police car. Chase’s new Fistigons glowed softly in the night, Karolina’s colors danced urgently around her hair and arms and hands, and Carlos transformed into a gray wolf, running low and dangerously along the pavement. Nico held up her staff and Allis wielded that plasma pistol the Steins had built, carrying it like she’d watched too many cop shows. They were insane to let her come along, but weren’t they all just teenagers throwing themselves into circumstances that could kill them? Why should Allis be any different?

Shouts and the sounds of fighting filled the air. The sizzle and snap of Blue Steel’s power beams, the white noise of

Whirlwind's churning air. The pop of Emilio Ochoa's teleportation. Something crashed, shattering glass, and over the top of the flipped cop car, Nico saw a fire hydrant arc across the street and smash through the fourth floor of an office building. Water spouted up from where the hydrant ought to be, and then it became a weapon. As Whirlwind zipped across the sky and banked, turning to attack the Nightwatch again, the water spewing from the exposed pipe jetted upward, turned in a stream, and smashed Whirlwind from the air. He skidded across the intersection, past the Runaways, and into plate glass windows stenciled with the name of a Brazilian steakhouse. The windows shattered, revealing that the place was empty—one benefit of the shit hitting the fan in the middle of the night.

Whirlwind started to get up. He spotted the Runaways and the Nightwatch kids, and then the water slammed him again, smashing him deeper into the recesses of the steakhouse.

Nico stepped out from behind the flipped police car. In the space of three seconds, she took it all in. Sunstroke was nowhere to be seen—maybe taken out of commission earlier. The Crimson Cowl stood in the middle of the street, as if the police barrier had prepared a stage for this fight. She faced off against Abernathy, the bald nerd with the skinny tie who even now tore an old-fashioned blue mailbox off the sidewalk and hurled it at her, using nothing but the power of his mind. The Crimson Cowl gestured and the cloak followed her thoughts, lengthening as it reached out to grab the mailbox and redirect it toward Abernathy, who parried it with his telekinesis. A battle of wills and minds.

With a cry of rage, Kathryn Zheng rose up from the ground on winds of her own summoning. Karolina took to the air, her beautiful colors painting the night, reflecting off the faces of buildings as she launched a volley of attacks at Kathryn. The elemental turned them aside with the wind, then with a shield of ice.

"It's over, Mother!" Zeke shouted in that rasping Kurdogrim voice. He hefted that massive battle-ax and then hurled it, end over end.

Kathryn reached toward the street and the ground came alive. A torrent of rock and soil and broken pavement shot upward and blocked the flying ax, then turned toward Kurdo-Zeke. The ugly giant staggered backward as stone and dirt pummeled him, and then he fell, while thousands of pounds of debris hammered down on top of him, burying him alive.

"You bitch!" Nico shouted. "That's your son!"

"Not anymore!" Kathryn cried back.

Nico held up the Staff of One, racking her brain, trying to remember a particular word. When it came to her, she smiled. "*Becalmed*."

The wind died out completely. Kathryn Zheng dropped from the sky. With a gesture, the woman brought a stream of water from the spouting fire hydrant to break her fall, but she plunged through it and struck the pavement with a sickening crack of bone. The water had slowed her, but not enough to save her left leg. For a few seconds, Kathryn writhed in pain, but then she looked up and sneered as she turned the blasting water against first Zeke and then Nico, hurling them backward.

Nico sputtered, slammed into the overturned police car, then took cover behind it again. Karolina arced overhead, wreathed in colors, and began to attack Kathryn. Nico took a deep breath, thinking about that word, *becalmed*. For sailors, it was the moment when the wind died completely. It could mean death for them, in the days when sails were all they had. She'd taken the wind from Kathryn's sails, but only temporarily. That broken leg would last a while longer, but they were already taking too long. They needed to end this. She had to find a way to capture the Nightwatch and she had no doubt that meant magic. If only she could come up with the right combination of words to forge a spell that

would contain them all. A simple sleep spell would do no good unless they were all together, and even then she had to come up with new wording—she'd tried that trick in the past.

"Think, Nico," she whispered to herself.

Racking her brain, she peered back around the police car and scanned the rest of the unfolding battle.

Blue Steel fought a tiger—Rosie Ochoa. The armored man picked the tiger up and smashed it against the pavement, then raised both hands, blue smoke pouring out of the small circles in the palms of his gloves, about to incinerate her. With a loud pop, Emilio appeared between them. Blue Steel's energy blast struck him instead of his wife and he flew backward in a tumble of arms and legs, his chest smoking. At some point he'd teleported back to his apartment to retrieve his sword, but now it flew from his hand again.

The tiger became a gorilla. Rosie jumped on Blue Steel, pummeled his helmet, and as he raised his left hand to fire a pulse blast into her skull, she grabbed his glove and crushed his hand. Inside his armor, Blue Steel screamed, even as the gorilla ripped off one glove and then the other.

The gorilla tried to tear off Blue Steel's helmet...but then the wolf jumped at her. Carlos—her son, her fellow shape-shifter—transformed into an enormous Bengal tiger mid-leap, crashed into the gorilla, and began to rip into his own mother.

Emilio saw it happening. Burned and battered, he shouted at his son to stop.

"Carlos, no!"

Nico knew they had to defeat the Nightwatch, but this was wrong. It hurt her to watch, no matter how evil these people were.

Old Lace barreled into the Carlos-tiger, knocked him into a car with such force that the tiger flopped to the ground, unconscious...and then its flesh and fur shifted back to

being Carlos, knocked out, arms and legs splayed. Nico smiled. Gert was out of sight but controlling Old Lace through their psychic connection, doing the right thing as always.

The gorilla, body slashed and bleeding, climbed to its feet and advanced on Old Lace and the tiger, but Molly Hayes ran to intercept.

Hands on her hips, koala bear hat on tight, Molly looked comical facing the gorilla that Rosie Ochoa had become. Bloody and staggering, Rosie growled as she reached for Molly, thinking she was an ordinary girl. Molly grabbed the gorilla's wrist, twisted, and smashed her to the pavement as gently as a superstrong eleven-year-old could.

Tess strode across the ruin of the intersection. Her mother and brother were fighting Molly and Old Lace just so they could keep fighting each other, but Tess's father saw her coming. Tess reached her hand into nothing, into that weird pocket dimension, and pulled out the burning sword she professed to love so much. Her father's eyes went wide at the sight of that burning blade.

"Tess, you can't do this!" he cried. "What's become of you? What's become of all of you?"

Receiving no answer, Emilio turned and scrambled across the pavement to reach his own sword. His fingers grasped the blade's handle just as Tess slashed the burning sword down, but with a *pop*, Emilio vanished. The flaming blade cut deep into the pavement, melting tar as it sliced.

Nico felt a chill up her spine. This wasn't what they'd agreed on. She'd said they wouldn't be a part of these kids killing their parents, and she'd meant it.

A stream of shrieked profanity reached her and she stepped around the flipped police car, ready to call a halt, and ready to get the Runaways out of there. Ahead of her, the Crimson Cowl had Abernathy wrapped up in her cloak. The telekinetic's glasses had fallen off and his tie was askew. He looked pitiful. The Cowl used her cloak to squeeze

him, the crimson material tightening, choking, maybe cracking bone...

Then it all shifted. Abernathy's lips curled in fury and he closed his eyes. The tendrils of crimson fabric around him drew back from him, withdrew in quick jerks and flaps, and wrapped themselves instead around the Crimson Cowl. Her own cloak began to coil around her like a massive, murderous serpent, and she cried out, then gasped for breath. Her mask cracked and a tendril of the cloak tore it free.

Nico knew that face from the Pride's files and from television. Sasha Hammer, daughter of Justine Hammer and the criminal mastermind called the Mandarin. Her mother had been the previous Crimson Cowl, and Sasha herself had once been an armored enemy of Iron Man's using the name Detroit Steel. Suddenly Blue Steel's armor made sense.

"Let her go!" Nico shouted at Abernathy. "Enough of this! It's over! Stop it now or we'll all end up dead."

Abernathy blinked. Perhaps for just a moment, his concentration waned, because Nico saw the relief on Sasha Hammer's face and then the Crimson Cowl blinked out of existence, using the tech in her cloak to teleport to safety.

"Aw, come on!" someone shouted.

Nico turned to see Blue Steel stumbling toward her, staring at Abernathy—or more likely at the place where his boss, the Crimson Cowl, had just stood. The glove portions of his armor were gone, exposing his hands. One looked mangled after being crushed by Rosie Ochoa in gorilla form.

Abernathy stared at him. "Go."

Blue Steel nodded, turned, and took flight. His boot jets crackled, nearly failed, but then they kicked in and he flew off past the ravaged side of the hotel and was gone.

Of Sunstroke and Whirlwind, there was no sign.

With a tremor that shook the ground beneath them, Kurdo-Zeke smashed himself free of the ton of rubble his mother had dropped on him. Rocks and dirt and pavement

went flying and he roared with such vicious fury that for a moment Nico couldn't be sure if this might truly be a Kurdogrim after all.

Zeke strode over to his fallen mother. She diverted the water toward him and he marched through it. She opened the ground beneath him and he leaped the chasm to grab her by her broken leg and lift her off the ground. The cruelty of it made Nico's breath catch in her throat, made her wonder who this guy was, who any of them were. For all that they'd felt betrayed by their parents, the Runaways had never been cruel. Their parents had died as a result of the conflict between them, but even after everything, they hadn't wanted their parents dead. This was different. This was sick.

"Now you see?" Zeke shouted, to be heard over his mother's screams. "You are not in control of us anymore!"

Abernathy looked at Nico and spoke a single word.

"Go," he said.

Nico frowned. "What?"

Then Allis stepped out from behind her, plasma pistol aimed at Abernathy. "Get away from him, Nico. He'll kill you."

Abernathy's face crumbled. "Not *this*."

As Allis pulled the trigger, Nico brought the Staff of One down on her arm. The plasma pistol fired, the shot burning a hole in Abernathy's shoulder. The telekinetic spun halfway around but he did not fall. Moaning in pain, he reached out toward the fallen police car and it lifted into the air with a shriek of metal, hovering above Allis.

"Why did you do this?" he cried. "Why?"

Nico looked up. The police car hung over her head. She lifted her staff, but in that moment, she couldn't think of a single spell that would save her life.



Karolina thought she must have screamed, but later she would wonder if the scream had just been in her head. She rode the air, rode the rainbow of light that slid around her as she arrowed down toward Allis and Nico. Both hands thrust ahead of her, she took a breath—needed that moment to focus. A narrow laser might burn through the police car or slice it in half, might make it explode.

With a burst of hard light, she blasted the police car backward.

In the same moment, Allis shot Abernathy again. The plasma burst struck him in the chest, low and to the left, and the thin man crumbled to the ground.

“No!” Karolina called. She landed between Allis and Abernathy, glanced at Nico and saw that her friend seemed just as horrified as she felt. “What are you doing, Allis? It’s over. We’re not murderers.”

Karolina turned and went to Abernathy. The man groaned, eyes closed.

“Hold still,” she said. “The police are nearby. They’re just waiting for this to end. They’ll help you, and they’ll decide what to do with you now.”

But Abernathy wasn’t looking at Karolina. His gaze had found someone else, just over her shoulder.

“Allis,” he said.

Karolina froze, breath caught in her throat. “Wait. How do you know—?”

“My dear Allis,” Abernathy went on. “You wanted power, I know. But how could you do this to me? You’d murder your own father?”

*No*, Karolina thought. He had to be disoriented, thinking she was someone else. But he’d said her name.

She turned to face Allis, saw the lopsided smile on the girl’s face—the lips Karolina had kissed—and found nothing inviting in that smile now. Only smug revelation and malice.

Allis tapped the side of her head. “Daddy’s girl. Just a touch of telepathy, the tiniest ability to influence those



around me—like making sure none of your friends argued when I wanted to join the fun. Gert’s fairly sensitive, by the way. She *felt* it. I had to push her a little more than the others. And I know you’ll be wondering, Karolina. You’ll probably wonder forever, but I didn’t influence you. I didn’t have to.”

“I thought...”

“You thought right.” Allis arched an eyebrow. “It was nice while it lasted.”

Sick with rage and betrayal, Karolina put herself between Allis Abernathy and her father. Allis raised the plasma pistol and aimed it at her, but Nico shifted around to stand beside Karolina.

“You really think we’re going to help you, now that we know the truth?” Nico asked.

“I don’t care what the rest of you do,” Allis said. “Only Karolina. What do you say, Kay? You’re a beautiful girl. We could have a real future together. Serve the Kurdogrim with us. We’ll hunt down the Gibborim and execute them, just like we’ll execute my parents.”

Gert and Old Lace were moving carefully toward Allis, as if they could help. Old Lace snarled. From the shadows another figure emerged—Chase, both of his Fistigons aimed at Allis.

“But Zeke said your parents served the Kurdogrim—” Gert began.

“Our parents? How stupid are you? Our parents have spent their lives *fighting* the Kurdogrim, keeping San Francisco safe—or trying to. No glory, no fame...just secret heroes, protecting the innocent. Well, to hell with the innocent! When the Kurdogrim came to us—”

Abernathy struggled to rise, first to his knees, then slowly to his feet. “Allis, how could you do this? You know what the Kurdogrim are, what they’ll do if—”

“We know what they’d do for us,” Allis sneered. “They’ll give us everything we’ve ever wanted, everything you

would never give us. All you ever cared about was protecting strangers, but while you were doing that, your daughter was alone. And the Kurdogrim were so persuasive. They're going to win eventually, Dad—the Elder Gods will rule humanity. Tess and Carlos, Zeke and I, we'll have everything...and we'll live forever."

From thirty yards away, beside the unconscious bodies of Carlos and Rosie Ochoa, Molly shouted at them all. "You liars!" she called, her face red with fury.

With a rumble of laughter, Kurdo-Zeke dragged his unconscious mother by her broken leg and tossed her onto the ground next to Abernathy. The stinking, leathery giant stood to his full height and glared down at them.

"I don't get it, Zeke," Nico said. "You saved my life. You said you wanted me to join you."

"I did want you to join me," he growled. "With your powers, well, it was easy to convince the Kurdogrim that you could be useful if we kept you alive. I figured...clever goth witch, lonely even with her supposed friends, never seems to get comfortable...you were ripe for the picking. It was worth a shot."

"You really don't know anything about people, especially families," Nico said. "No wonder you betrayed your own."

"Is that supposed to hurt?" Kurdo-Zeke said. "Do you still not get how deep this goes? I made a deal with the Kurdogrim before I turned ten years old. I brought the others in. When you destroyed the Pride, I'm the one who came up with the plan. I told the Kurdogrim to quiet down, act like they were dying, stop making trouble in San Francisco so the *heroic* Nightwatch would think maybe they'd won, after all these years. Then I told my mother and Abernathy that now was their chance, while the Kurdogrim were quiet and the Pride were gone. Come to L.A., take down the last followers of the Pride, make sure the Gibborim *never find another foothold in this world.*"

He said the last bit with all the theatrical flair of a bad Shakespearean actor. And then he snickered. "I told them it was time for us to expand the family hero business. I convinced them Allis and Carlos and me and Tess...we'd stay in L.A., protect the innocents like they were protecting the innocents in San Francisco. We'd be 'Nightwatch Junior' or some shit like that."

"You little bastard," Abernathy hissed.

Kurdo-Zeke smiled a terrible smile, still focused on Nico. "We had a plan. Infiltrate your little gang, lie our asses off, get you on our side, kill our parents and then all of you. Allis went out to offer herself up to the Pride's minions as a sacrifice to the Gibborim, but first Carlos went out and shape-shifted, made sure you girls knew kids had been vanishing, made sure you knew one particular girl had just been taken."

Karolina flashed back to that night outside the dance club. The whole thing had been a setup. Carlos's mother could only become animals, but it seemed her son could do more than that.

"The problem was that without Allis around, we couldn't keep shielding our thoughts from Abernathy," Zeke said. "Not well enough. His telepathy's crap, but he caught enough of a hint that it put them on guard. We fought. I got away. You know the rest."

Nico shook her head. "But Emilio...he tried to kill me. Heroes don't..."

Zeke smiled. "Oh, they don't. Remind me how your parents died? Don't be stupid. You're the daughter of dark wizards and you attacked the Nightwatch right by my side. He figured you were there to kill him. Not that it matters. It's over for all of you, now."

Zeke walked to Nico, glared down at her. "It's a shame. I had high hopes for you."

Allis turned to Karolina. "What about you, Kay? You don't all have to die."

A bark of laughter echoed across the street. Tess walked toward the growing circle with a new weapon in her hands, a bow made of pure golden light. She had an arrow nocked into the bow, a red thing that steamed with scarlet mist. Karolina had no idea what such an arrow would do to her, but she knew it would do more than make a hole. Chase aimed one Fistigon at her and the other stayed trained on Allis.

Karolina lifted one hand, just a hint of color dancing around her fingers.

"Watch it, bitch," Tess said. "Allis may like the way you kiss, but I will kill you where you stand if you even look at her wrong."

"Forget it," Kurdo-Zeke rumbled. "Let's just kill them all and be done with it. Immortality's waiting."

Nico sighed loudly. "You are such an asshole," she said. "Also, I've gotta say...*Body Swap*."

The Kurdogrim Zeke started to shout. His voice shifted mid-word as his giant, ancient form blinked out of the world and his own body reappeared, handsome as ever, but with his good looks poisoned by rage.

"What did you do?" he roared at Nico, lunging for her as if to strangle her.

Nico used the staff to crack him in the side of the head. Zeke fell hard, knocked out. "Lonely, clever goth witch, remember? I'm just being who you think I am."

Allis aimed her plasma pistol at Nico. Chase stepped up and pressed one Fistigon against her skull, the threat implicit. He ripped the plasma pistol out of her hand. "I knew Zeke couldn't be trusted," he said. "But I guess you made sure I trusted you."

Allis smiled.

Tess released her arrow.

Karolina flicked her wrist, and spirals of color whipped out and snatched the arrow out of the air and sent it flying into a pile of rubble. Tess gestured and another arrow appeared

in her hand. She nocked it against the string, drew it back... and her father popped into existence behind her. The sound of that pop, so familiar, made Tess hesitate and begin to turn, but she never saw the anguish on her father's face as he struck her from behind.

Tess fell, gasping in pain. She rolled over and stared up at her father. Emilio stood over her, the point of his sword pressed against her sternum. Tears streaked his face as he commanded her to be still—as he found himself forced to threaten his own daughter's life.

Karolina glanced around at the ruin of three families. She thought about the Nightwatch—the Ochoas and Abernathy and Kathryn Zheng—these parents who had just suffered the worst betrayal imaginable. Their children had twisted everything they'd ever been taught into some horrifying grasp for power, for immortality, for freedom from their parents' rules. It should've been unimaginable, but Karolina and her friends had suffered a betrayal just as awful, just as painful, so she knew what it was like. In days to come, the Nightwatch would wish they could go back to the time before they knew about the darkness that thrived in the hearts of their children.

"Well, Karolina?" Allis asked. "How about it?"

Karolina felt a tickle at the back of her mind, just the slightest hint of a push, the psychic influence that Allis could exert. Not her full power, Karolina was sure. Just a whisper, a suggestion of what Allis could really do if she wanted to.

So why didn't she? Why didn't she try to bend them all to her will? Even if that was beyond her, she could twist Chase, make him use the Fistigons on Nico. Make Molly pummel Gert. Maybe get Old Lace to look at Chase and see dinner.

Why didn't Allis do any of those things?

Karolina felt a dreadful sadness fill her. She stared at Allis with dawning horror, her eyes filling with tears she refused to shed.

“Kay?” Gert said. “It’s all right. Ignore her. She knows it’s over.”

Karolina closed the distance between herself and Allis. Chase and Nico stepped back as Karolina came face-to-face with this girl she’d laughed with, this girl who had kissed her, touched her. This girl who’d seemed real and true.

“I believed in you,” Karolina said, and she gave a dry laugh. “You were the damsel in distress. Made us believe you needed our help.”

“But I did need your help. Just not the way you thought.”

Karolina balled her fists, fingernails cutting into the skin of her palms.

“You going to hurt me now?” Allis asked, trying to make it seem like a joke, though there was a quaver in her voice.

“I think I am,” Karolina said, lifting her hands. “But not with these.” She summoned bright colors that sparked from her fingers and began to flow through her hair. “And not with my powers. The thing is, Allis, I opened up to you, and I think you opened up to me, too. I think there’s a part of you that never wanted any of this to happen.”

Allis laughed. “Oh, is *that* what you think?”

Karolina nodded. She reached out to stroke Allis’s cheek, where the bruises from days before had still not faded. “Yes. It really is. You had a chance just now, a moment when you could’ve kept fighting, maybe even won. I think part of you never wanted to win. You had two shots at your dad. You could’ve killed him with that second one, if you’d really wanted him dead.”

Allis lowered her gaze, brushed away Karolina’s touch.

Karolina glanced around. Zeke and Carlos were unconscious, as was Kathryn Zheng. Rosie Ochoa had come around, but she sat on the street, one hand over a wound on her chest. Emilio Ochoa stood over their daughter, sword in hand, ready to cut her if she forced him to. The Runaways had gathered around Karolina and Allis now, and Karolina glanced at her friends—Nico and Chase, Molly and Gert and

Old Lace. Her family. Molly had picked up the gigantic ax that Kurdo-Zeke had dropped, dragging it at her side. The sight ignited a spark of love in Karolina's heart for this girl, this sister the harsh world had given her.

Abernathy lay on the ground, wounded, breathing hard with his pain, but his eyes were open, and now Kathryn Zheng began to come around. The Nightwatch was intact. They'd been heroes all along, and now they would have to decide what to do with the most insidious enemies they'd ever faced—their own children.

"Your father's going to recover from what you've done, Allis," Karolina said. "But honestly? I don't think you ever will."

One hand over his wound, Abernathy climbed to his feet. "You kids can go now. I'm sorry that our children dragged you all into this. If you ever need help, if there's anything the Nightwatch can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask. But I think we'll take it from here."

Nico put an arm around Karolina. Molly took her free hand. "We're sorry for what's happened," Nico replied, forcing herself to hold Abernathy's gaze, though she wanted very much to look away from the sadness in his eyes. "And the feeling's mutual—if you need us, just ask. But for tonight..." She glanced around at her friends. Her team. Her family. "For tonight, we just want to go home." Chase slid an arm around Gert, while Old Lace narrowed her eyes and spit on Zeke's unconscious form.

"Can we get the hell out of here?" Chase asked.

"Absolutely," Nico replied.

And so they did.



## SIXTEEN

***Three days later.***

**N**ico felt like she was burning alive. She trudged across the sand, muscles straining, the heat baking into her brain. The sunlight seared her skin and her throat felt parched. Desperation made her heart race and she glanced over her shoulder, searching for an escape route—any way out of the torment she'd found herself in.

"Nowhere to run," Chase said, as he marched alongside her.

Nico blew out a breath, resigning herself. "This is a terrible idea."

To her right, Karolina almost seemed to bounce along the sand in jubilation. "Are you kidding me? This is exactly what we need!"

"Fine." Nico huffed, lowered her face so the brim of her black lace hat would block some of the sunshine, and followed dutifully after Gert and Molly, who were already



running toward the waves, even though they hadn't set up their gear. "But I *hate* the beach."

Karolina laughed, dropped the beach umbrella she'd been carrying—nearly impaling Nico's foot—and ran after Molly and Gert. Molly, who'd begged them to bring her newly acquired and deeply cherished Kurdogrim ax on this picnic, and sulked when they'd all said no. The sulking had been replaced by laughter, and it was a beautiful sound.

Only Chase stayed behind with Nico. The two of them spread out a woven blanket, and weighted down one corner with the cooler and the others with piles of flip-flops and the beach bag Gert had already abandoned.

Three days had passed since the impossibly long night when they'd thrown the Masters of Evil at the Nightwatch—two days since they'd discovered just how badly they'd been manipulated by Zeke and Allis and the Ochoa siblings. The Runaways had used the Masters of Evil as weapons, but Zeke and his friends had done the same to them. For the first twenty-four hours afterward, they'd done very little other than sleep and give each other sullen, regretful glances as they moved through the Hostel. The hideout beneath the La Brea Tar Pits ought to have been buzzing with excitement as they explored, but instead, they kept to their rooms with small breaks as they foraged for food.

This morning, Gert had declared that she'd had enough and suggested they go to Venice Beach. Every atom in Nico's body had rejected this plan. She preferred quiet shadows to glaring sunlight. Her goth leanings made the beach just about the last place she pictured herself, but if she had to go to the beach, Venice Beach was the worst possible choice. The sheer number of tourists was overwhelming, not to mention the bleach-blond, fake-boobed beach bunnies, and the overearnest athletes running or biking the path alongside the beach and casting judging glances at anyone not perfectly fit.

Plus, she burned. Somewhere along the line, white people had become convinced that people of other races were immune to sunburn, which was stupid, but considering 7 percent of American adults thought chocolate milk came from brown cows, there was plenty of stupid to go around. Nico didn't relish the idea of sacrificing her skin to prove Japanese American girls could burn, so if she was going to be forced into a day of "beach fun," that meant a good umbrella, a hat, a cover-up, and sunscreen with about 1,500 SPF. If she could create enough shade and she could sit and read her Scandinavian murder mystery without anyone bothering her, she might be able to endure the day.

Chase dragged off his shirt and kicked off his flip-flops, then stood and watched Nico as she anchored the base of the umbrella in the sand.

"I'm glad you went along with this," Chase said.

"We really should be tracking down the Pride's minions," she said. Chase had been searching surveillance camera footage from the night they'd saved Allis. Nico and Gert had been checking police logs for any injuries or deaths from that same night in hopes of getting a lead on the cult. The Nightwatch might have killed one or two of them, but most of the cult had survived. Nico thought they'd scattered, but she didn't know where they'd gone or who they were.

"We've been working on it," Chase reminded her. "It's okay to take a day off, Nico. We need this. If the cult is still together, you know we'll find them. But just for today... we're at the beach. Exhale. Breathe. We're young and we're alive. The world is still turning."

Nico kept working the umbrella's base into the sand. "I guess."

Chase laughed. "I know you hate it, but Molly would have been really bummed if you'd said 'no.' Karolina, too."

"It wasn't really up to me."

Chase arched an eyebrow. "It was, though. We'd basically made you the leader before, but it was a casual thing. Like,

'oh, Nico's the responsible one—'"

"Gert's the responsible one."

"You know what I mean. You were the leader because you wanted to make the decisions, and we all wanted you to make them so we wouldn't have to. It's different now. Now you're the leader because we want you to lead. We know when things get ugly, you're our best shot."

Nico smiled. "Would you still feel that way if I'd nixed going to the beach?"

Chase smiled. "Honestly? Probably not."

"Good to know. Though I have to say, just because I went along with it, doesn't mean I have to like it."

"I don't think too many people will recognize us," Chase said. "There are thousands of people here. We've all got sunglasses on. Gert's wearing that floppy sun hat, and we didn't bring our dinosaur."

Nico laughed. "Old Lace *would* have been a dead giveaway. And I know you're right. We've all just been sitting around with all this simmering tension—"

"With good reason."

"No argument," Nico said, locking the upper half of the umbrella in place. "We got played. All of us."

"Some more than others," Chase said, and the grim tone in his voice made Nico stop what she was doing.

She looked up to see him staring out at the waves, where Gert and Molly were splashing each other. A few feet away, Karolina stood in the surf like the perfect California girl she was. Tiny bikini, mirrored shades, blond tresses already wet from the water and hanging down her back. Nico didn't think she'd ever seen a better example of the old cliché that appearances could be deceiving. Karolina wasn't a California girl. She wasn't even an Earth girl. Looking at her, though, it was impossible not to see a kind of unflappable perfection. No one would have guessed how much Allis's deception must have wounded the beautiful spirit beneath that perfect facade. Karolina always wanted to see the best in everyone

and she'd taken to Allis immediately, only to have her sweetness twisted into a weapon to be used against her.

But Chase's innuendo had nothing to do with Karolina.

"She loves you, dummy," Nico said, opening her umbrella. Her whole body exhaled now that she had created some shade.

Chase ran his hands through his scraggly hair and shook it out. If Karolina looked the part, so did he. If they hadn't been forced to stick to the shadows for so long, Chase would no doubt have had a deep tan. He'd been born for the life of an L.A. surf bum, but none of them were ever going to get the life they should've had. They had to make new lives for themselves.

"I love her, too," Chase replied, helping Nico spread her towel out under the umbrella. "But Zeke messed it all up."

"He messed with her head, and with yours," Nico corrected. "Plus, Allis was there the whole time. She admitted she was giving us all a little psychic push here and there to manipulate us. Zeke pushed buttons on purpose. He wanted you and Gert unsure of each other. The five of us are a family, and Allis knew there was no room for her and Zeke unless they could *make* room. They had to make us all less sure."

Chase stood halfway in the shadow of the umbrella with her, half in the sunshine. For a moment, he dropped the surfer-boy mask and she saw the real worry on his face.

"What if it had nothing to do with Allis?" Chase said quietly. "What if Zeke was just a cute guy who paid attention to her and that was enough to make her second-guess being with me?"

Nico shoved him back out into the sun. "Toughen up, Stein. I've got news for you. That girlfriend of yours is smart and cute and there are always going to be guys who are smarter than you, cuter than you, and more charming than you. Some of them are going to flirt with Gert."

Chase held his hands up in surrender. "If this is your idea of a pep talk, I'm pretty sure you're doing it wrong."

Adjusting her hat and sunglasses, Nico stepped out from beneath the umbrella. Somewhere nearby, a radio thumped out the rhythm of something old-school. A laughing little girl ran past, pursued by her father. In the sky, far along the beach, there seemed to be some kind of kite festival happening. Some of the tension in her shoulders seemed to unknot itself.

"All I'm saying is this," Nico began. "For some reason the rest of the world can't figure out, you're the guy for Gert. She looks at that shaggy head and the goofy grin and those skinny arms, and she sees the man of her dreams."

"Are you *trying* to be abusive, or does it just come naturally?"

Nico smiled. "Hush. I'm sharing my wisdom."

"Oh, is that what this is?"

"It's an honor to have somebody love you, Chase. Gert's honoring you. If you're worried about hanging on to her, just remember that honor. Live up to it. Be the guy she sees when she gets all dopey-eyed over you. As long as you're that guy, you'll never have to worry about some better-looking dude coming along and charming her pants off."

Chase rolled his eyes and threw up his hands. "Come on, Nico. Nobody, I mean, seriously, nobody can live up to other people's ideal image of them."

He'd barely finished the sentence when somebody shouted "*Heads up!*" and a bright pink Frisbee thunked into the back of his head.

"Ow!" Chase moaned. "Damn, that hurt." He bent to pick up the Frisbee and flipped it back to the ponytailed mom who'd come to fetch it. She apologized for her husband, who'd made the bad throw but was too embarrassed to own up to it.

Nico couldn't help laughing as Chase walked back over to their beach blanket.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No. It was funny. I recognize the funny."

"It's just the sound it made," Nico explained. "The *thunk* sound." She snickered, then started laughing out loud. "Like your skull..." She had to catch her breath. "Like your skull was hollow."

"Now you're just being hurtful."

Nico caught her breath. When she looked up, she realized she'd come farther from the shade of her umbrella than she'd intended. Down at the water, Gert and Molly were body-surfing in the waves. Karolina sat just at the edge of the surf, letting it foam and roll over her legs.

"Go," Nico said. "Go and tell her all of it. What she means to you."

Chase glanced over at the water. At Gert.

"You up for a swim?" he asked.

Nico shook her head. "This is all you." She turned back toward her umbrella, but she hesitated.

"Hey, Chase?"

He paused.

"You don't have to be anyone's ideal," Nico said.

"Nobody does. All you have to do is try your best, and you already do that. It's why she loves you. Keep it up and you'll be fine."

"Thanks, Nico," Chase said. "That's sweet, actually."

"Just don't tell anyone," she replied. "You'll ruin my image."

She watched him walk down to the surf and pull Gert aside. In the sunshine, he spoke urgently, and soon they were both smiling. Gert kissed him, and then shoved him into the water. Chase stumbled and fell into the waves, and then Gert and Molly were both jumping on him, wrestling with him and laughing as they dunked him. When he came up, sputtering, Chase grinned as he picked Gert up on one shoulder and then hurled her into the water.

Nico took off her hat and sunglasses and put them on the towel beneath her umbrella.

She took off running. Sand kicking up behind her, she sprinted for the waves, where the rest of her friends—the rest of her family—were already laughing together.

When Nico reached the surf Chase started splashing her. She punched him and promised to turn him into a newt, but he picked her up, staggered deeper, and dumped her into the water, much to everyone's amusement. The Pacific was colder than she expected and that dark chill enveloped her, soothing her, easing the remaining tension in her.

Grinning, she rose from the ocean, intent upon her revenge, only to discover that the other girls had risen to defend her. Gert and Molly were once again forcibly dunking Chase while Karolina finally waded deeper into the water to join them.

As she splashed Karolina, Nico thought that perhaps the sun wasn't her enemy after all. There would always be shadows. The Runaways needed them. Though the shadows could sometimes hide terrible danger, they also offered quiet sanctuary. The Runaways had thrived in the shadows because they had each other. They made it through together. And no matter what threats they faced, they'd keep going, and they would help others do the same.

Today, though—just for today—they would enjoy the sun.







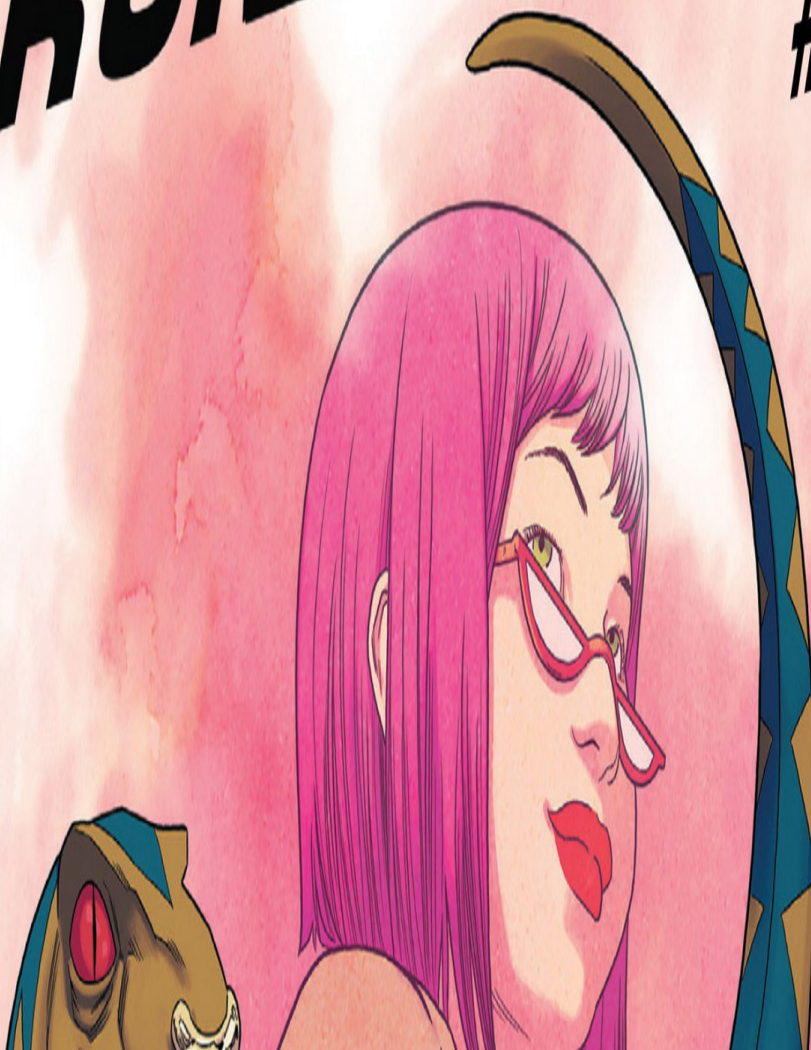




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# RUNAWAYS

#1









MARVEL

Avengers  
Endgame









Nico Minoru is  
a very powerful  
magician.



She used to  
be a Runaway...

Then she  
ran away.







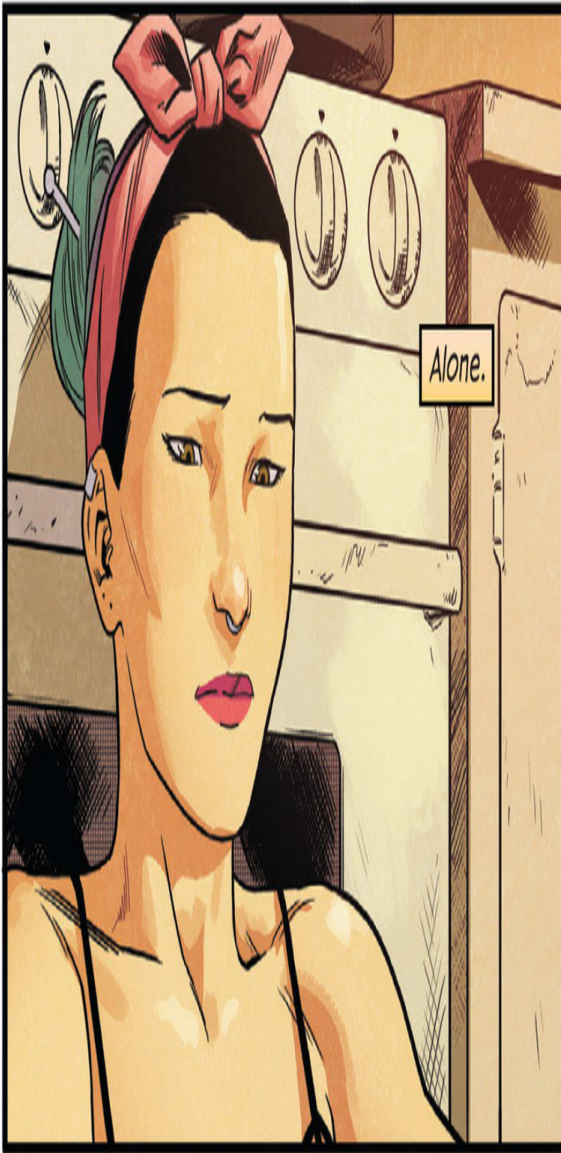
Then she was a missing person.  
A spare part.



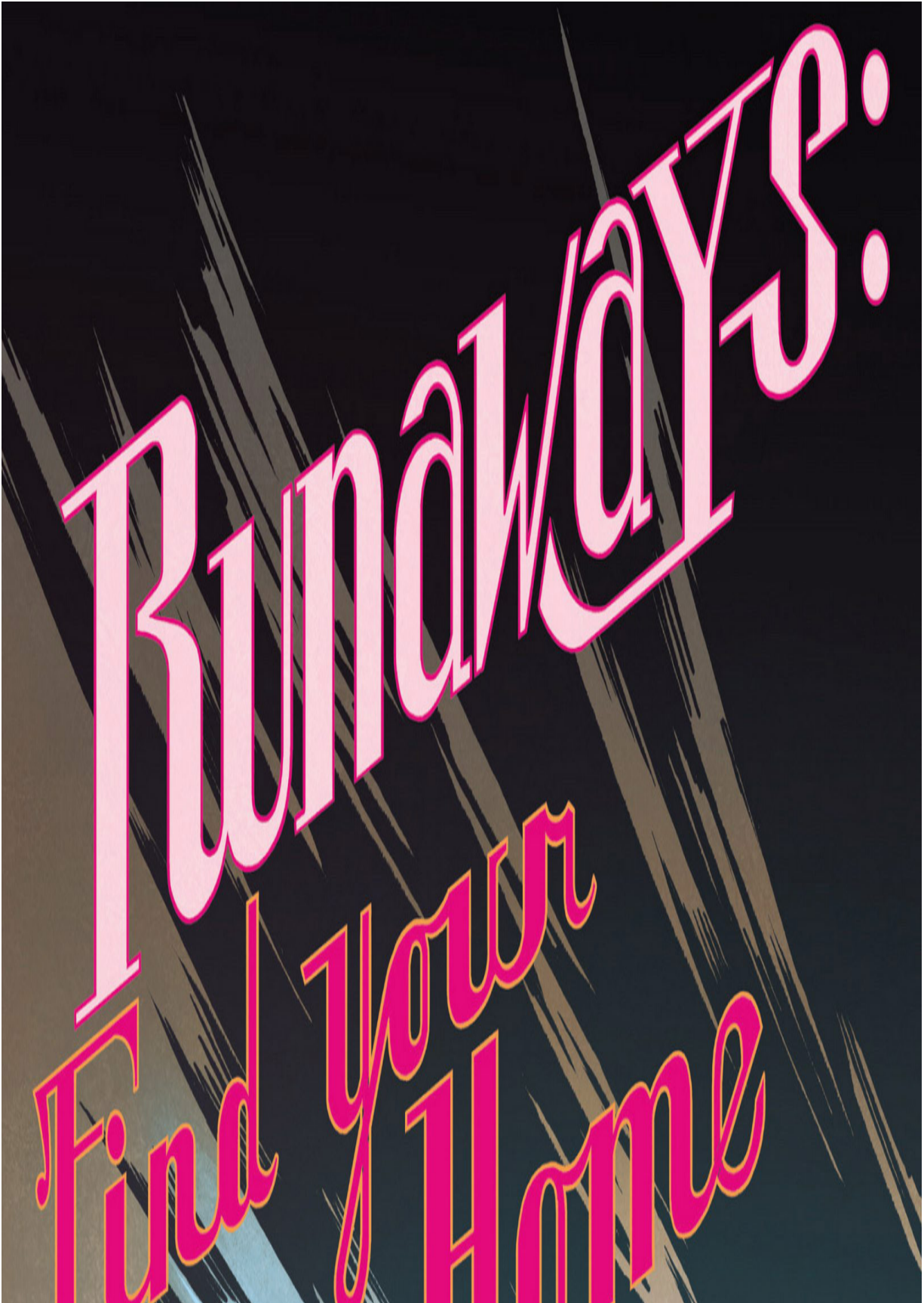
She was in the best girl gang ever for a hot minute. Should have known that wouldn't last...



What do you call a Runaway with nowhere left to go?































(And no  
getting  
used to it.)



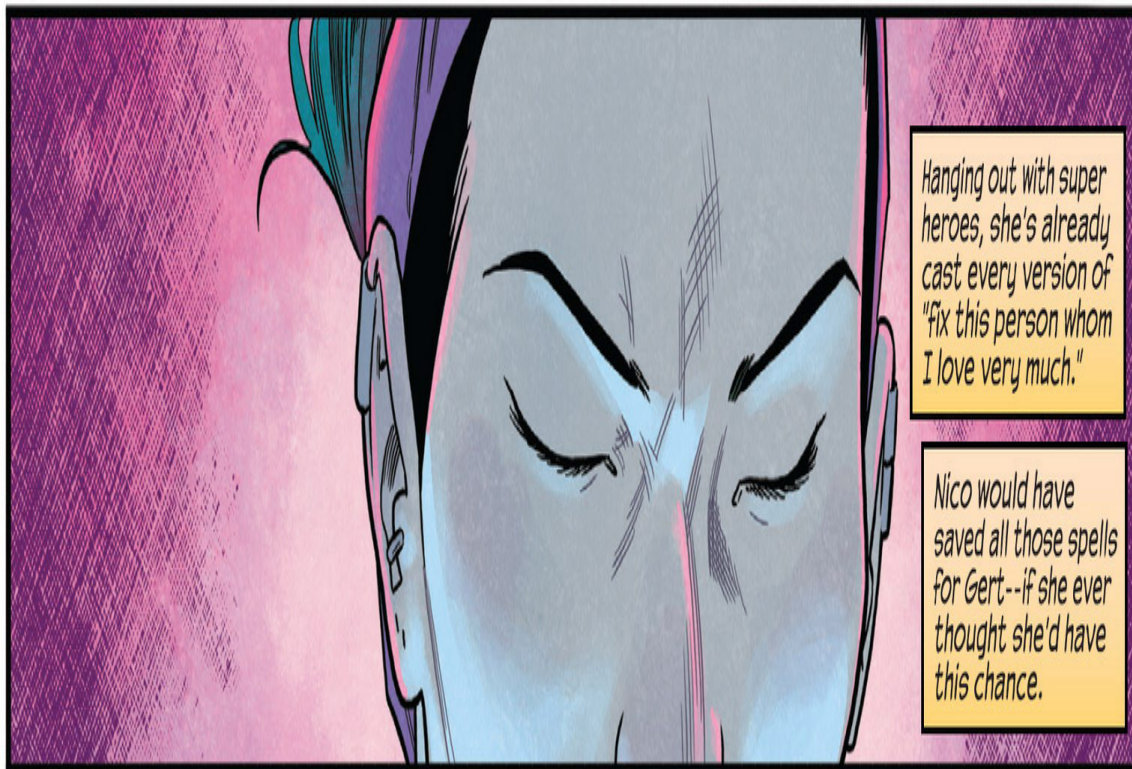
Only then can Nico  
cast a spell...

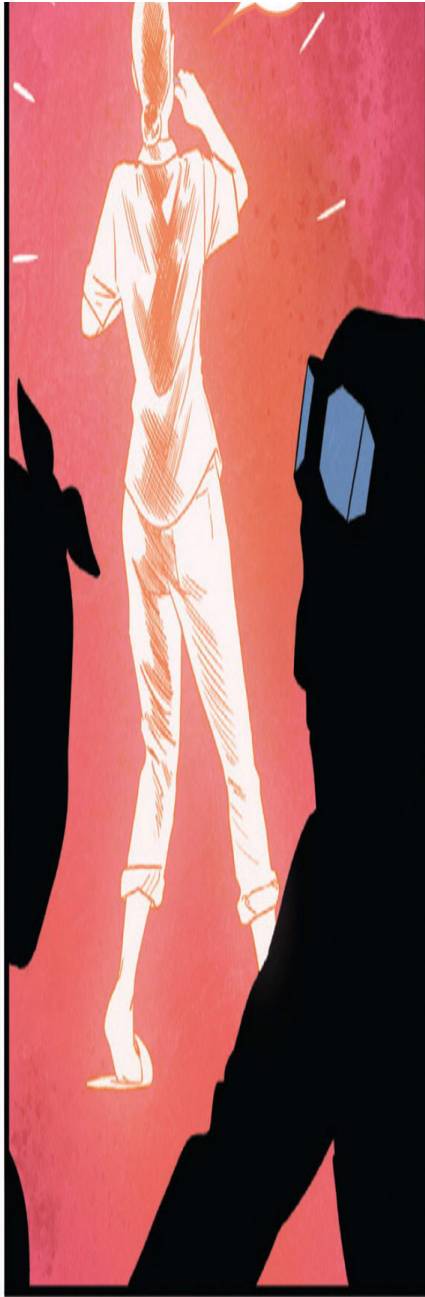
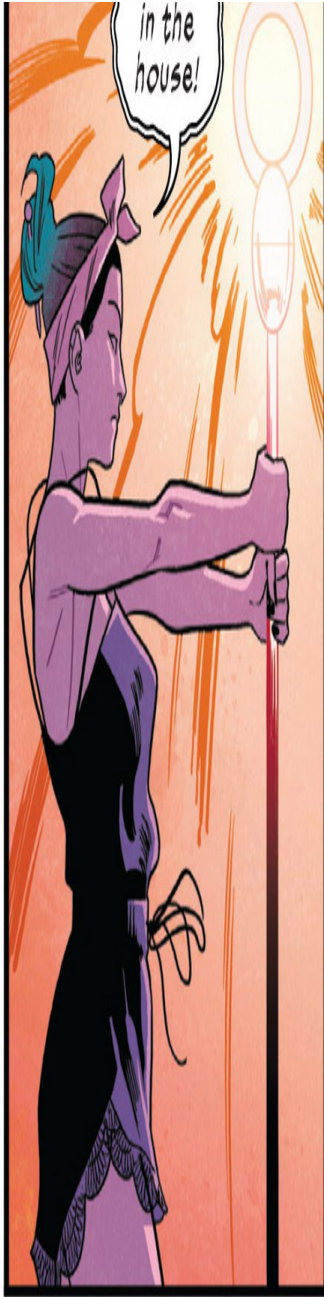
But never the  
same spell twice.



When  
blood is  
shed...let the  
Staff of One  
emerge.



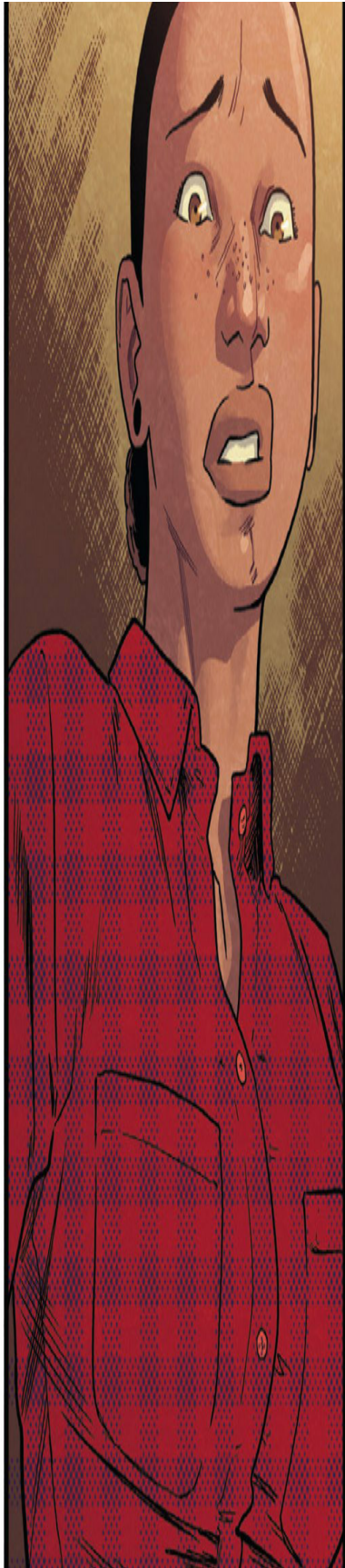










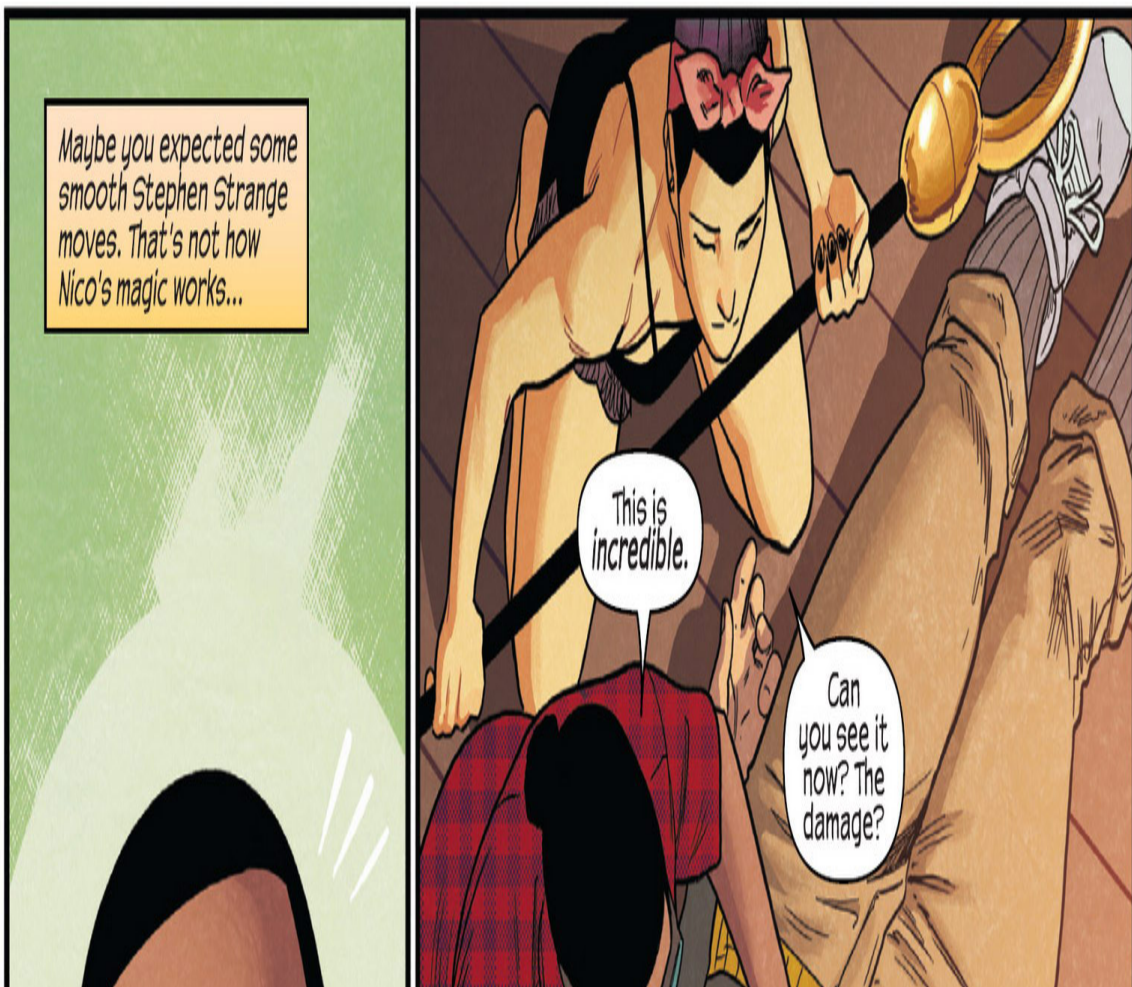


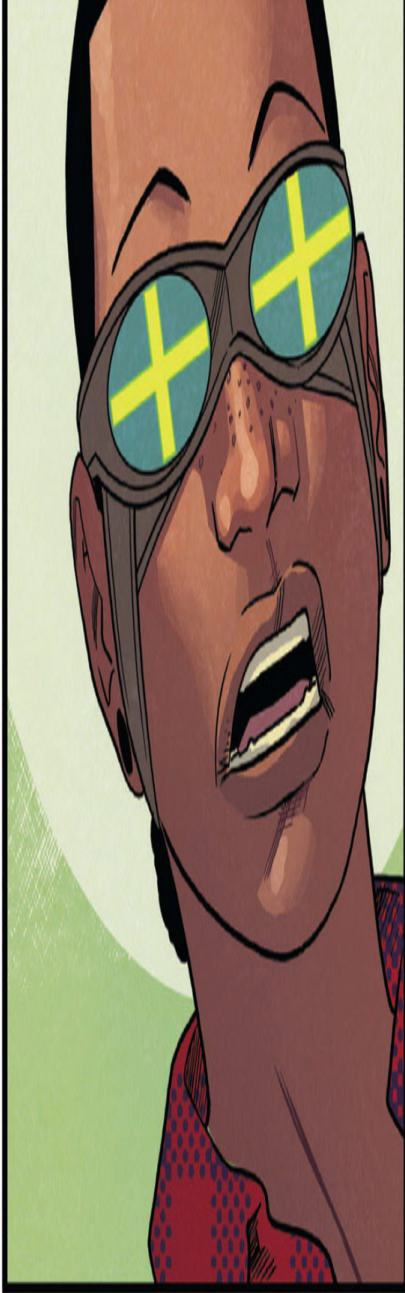






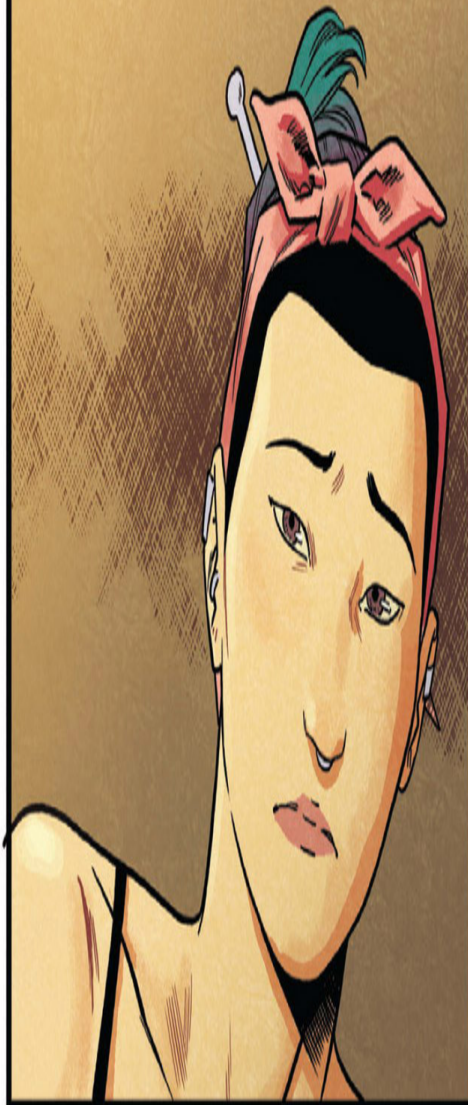








All Nico knows  
how to do is  
improvise.

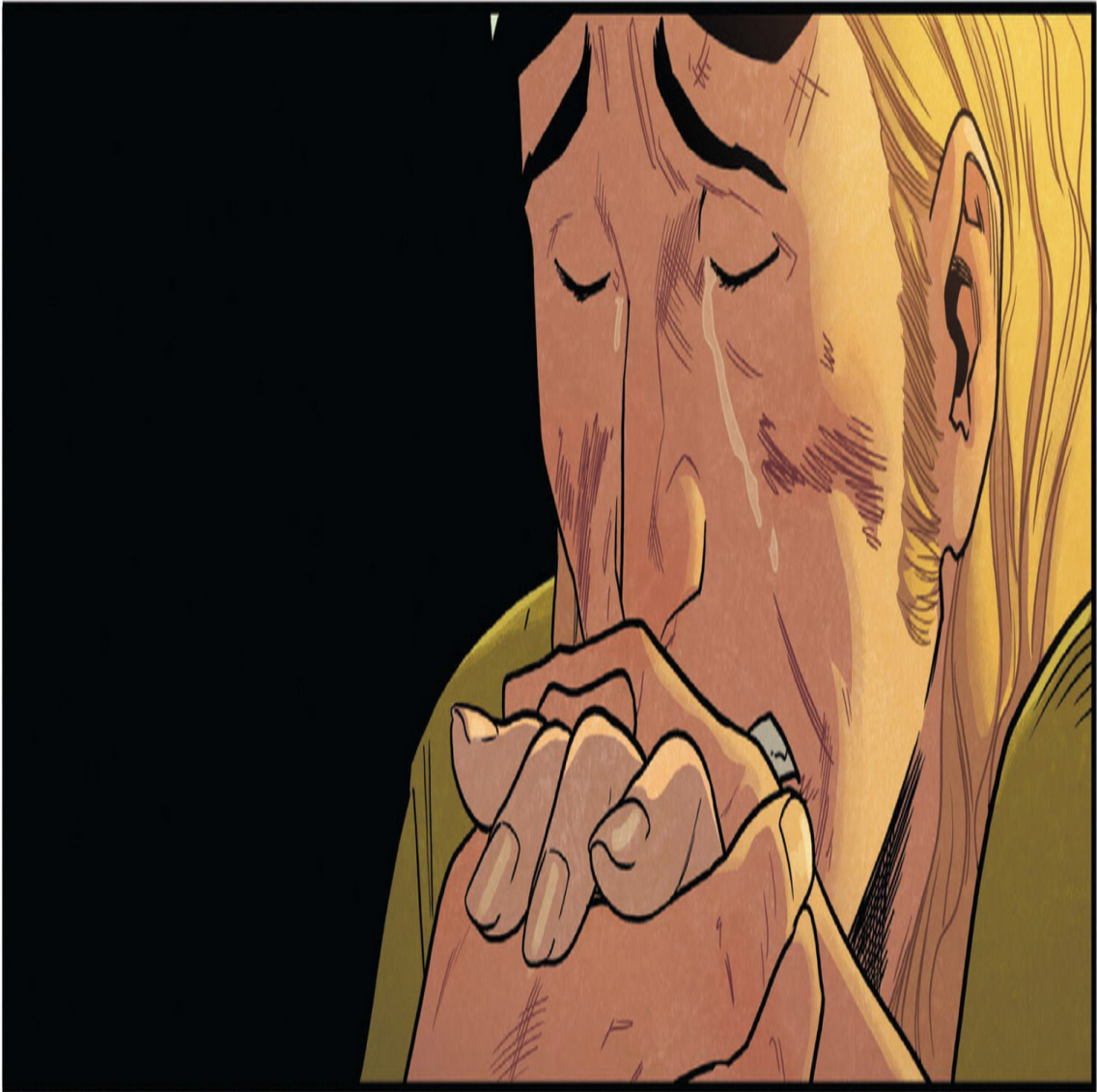


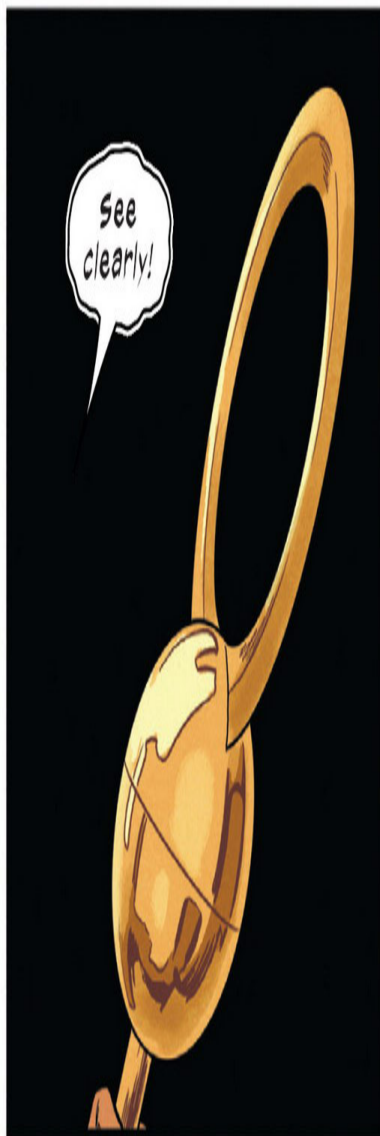
Um, it's not her spleen. I--I  
don't think it's her stomach.  
I still can't see. There's  
so much blood.

What  
would you do  
if you were in  
surgery?









See  
clearly!



She must have used  
that spell before.  
The Staff of One  
hates reruns.



Maybe her parents  
could have taught her  
to use the staff...

...if Nico and  
her friends  
hadn't basically







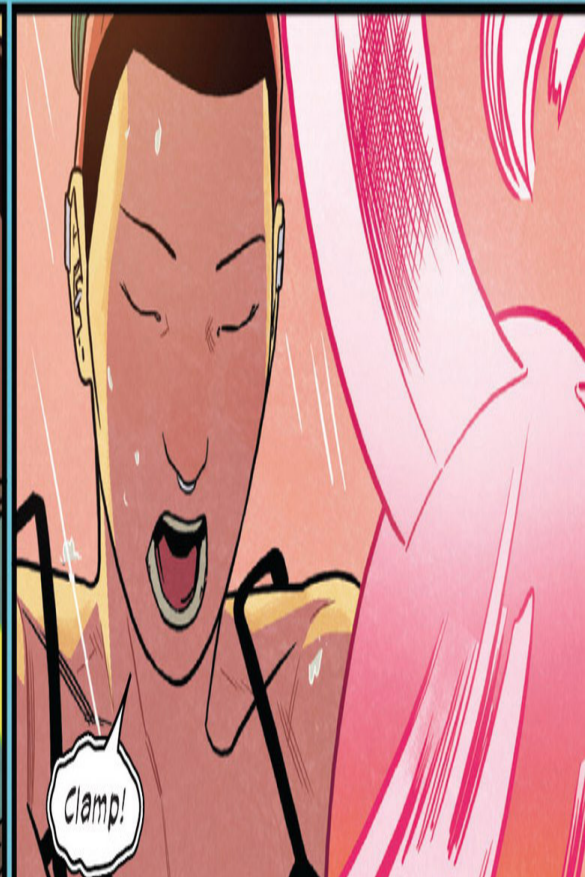






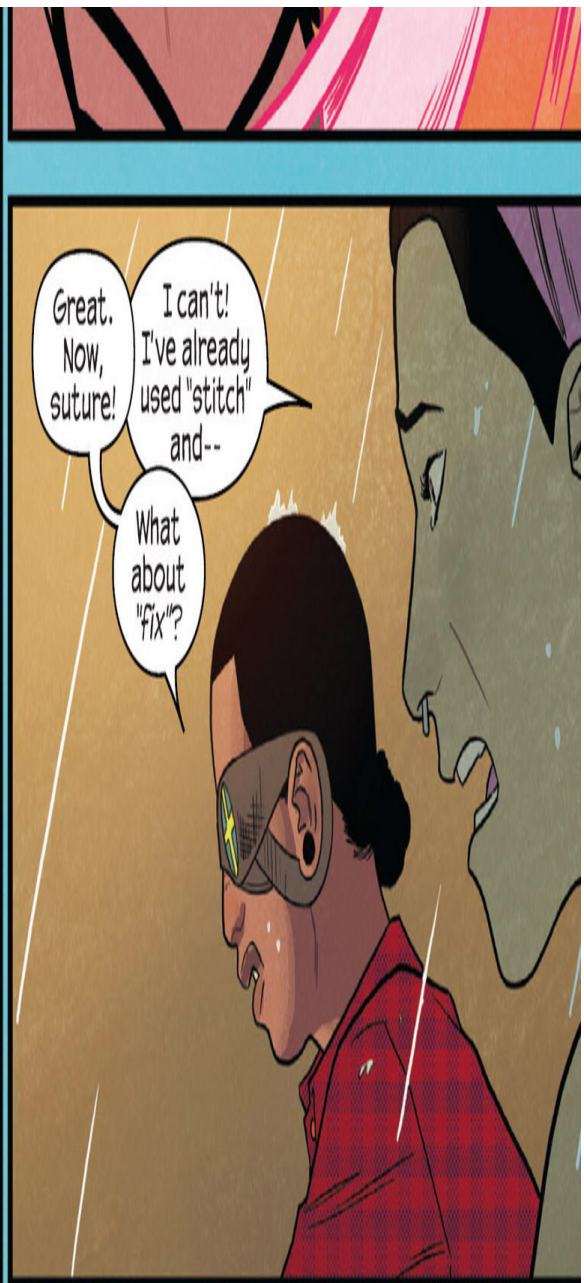








Clamp!



Great.  
Now,  
suture!

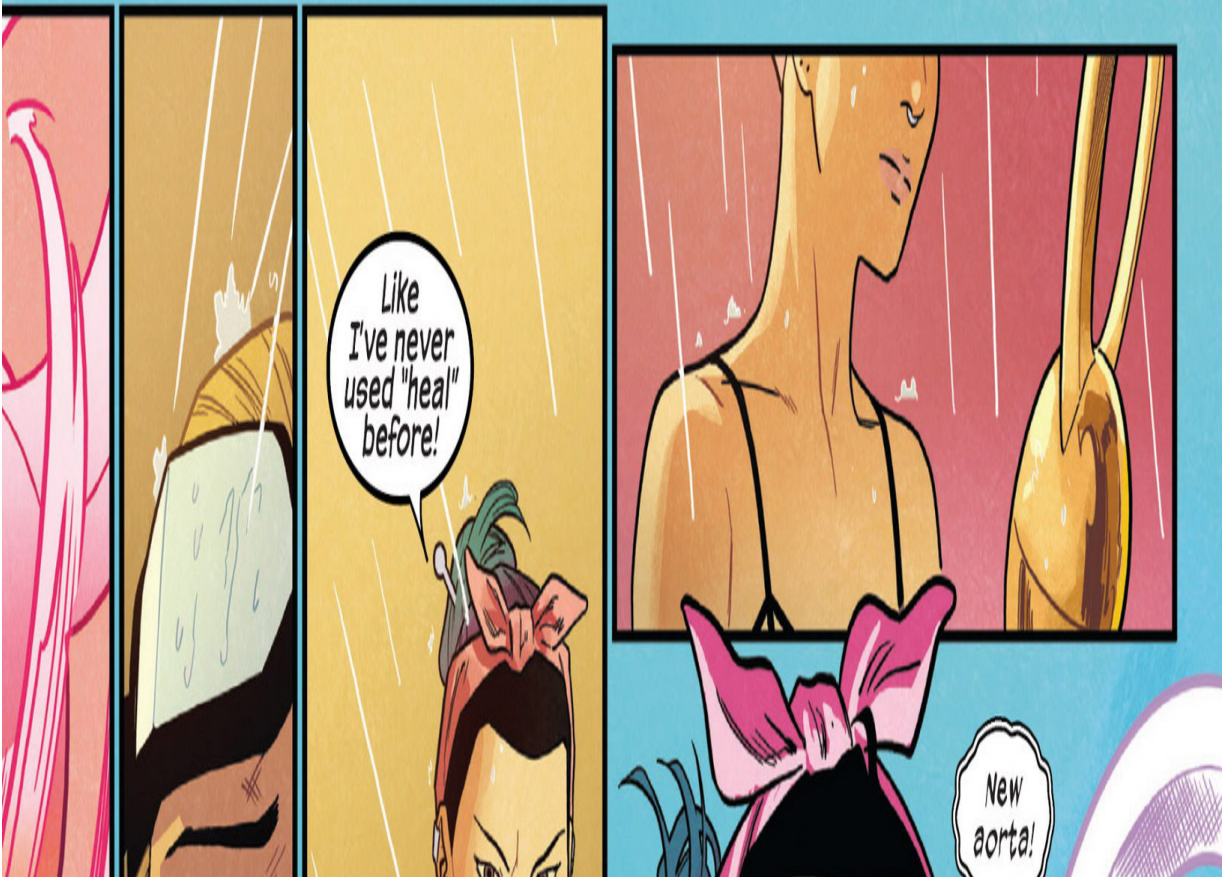
I can't!  
I've already  
used "stitch"  
and--

What  
about  
"fix"?









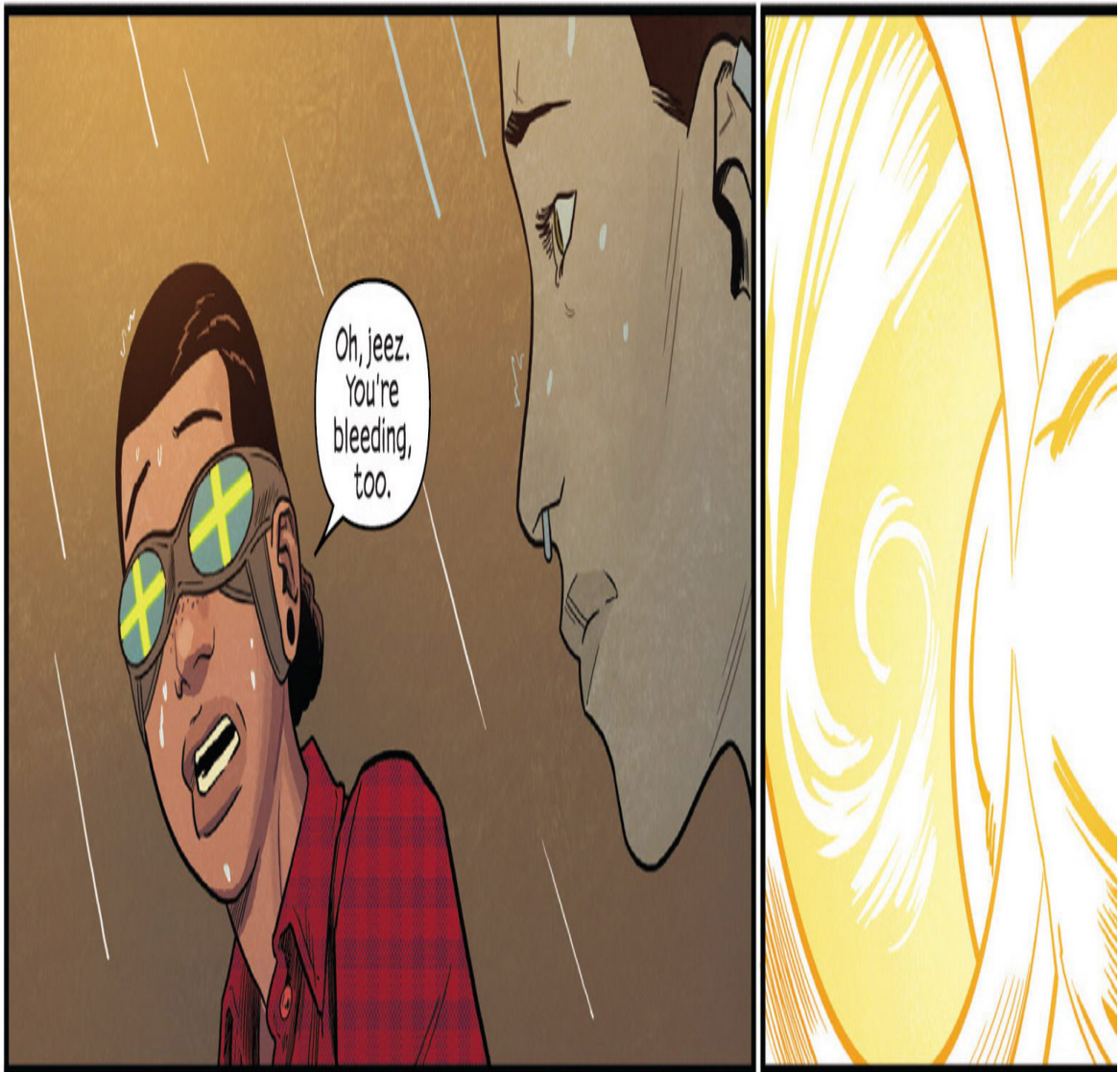














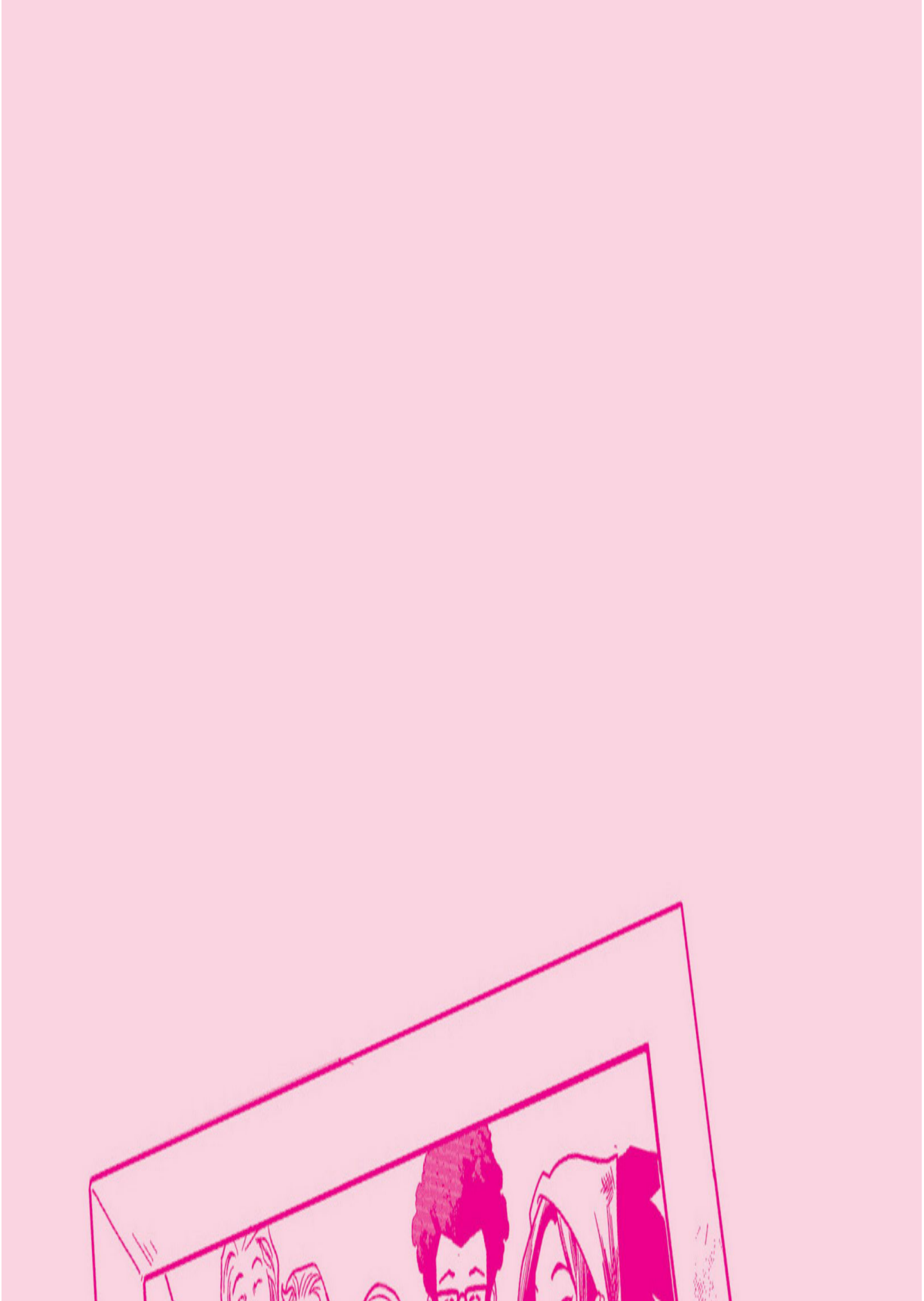


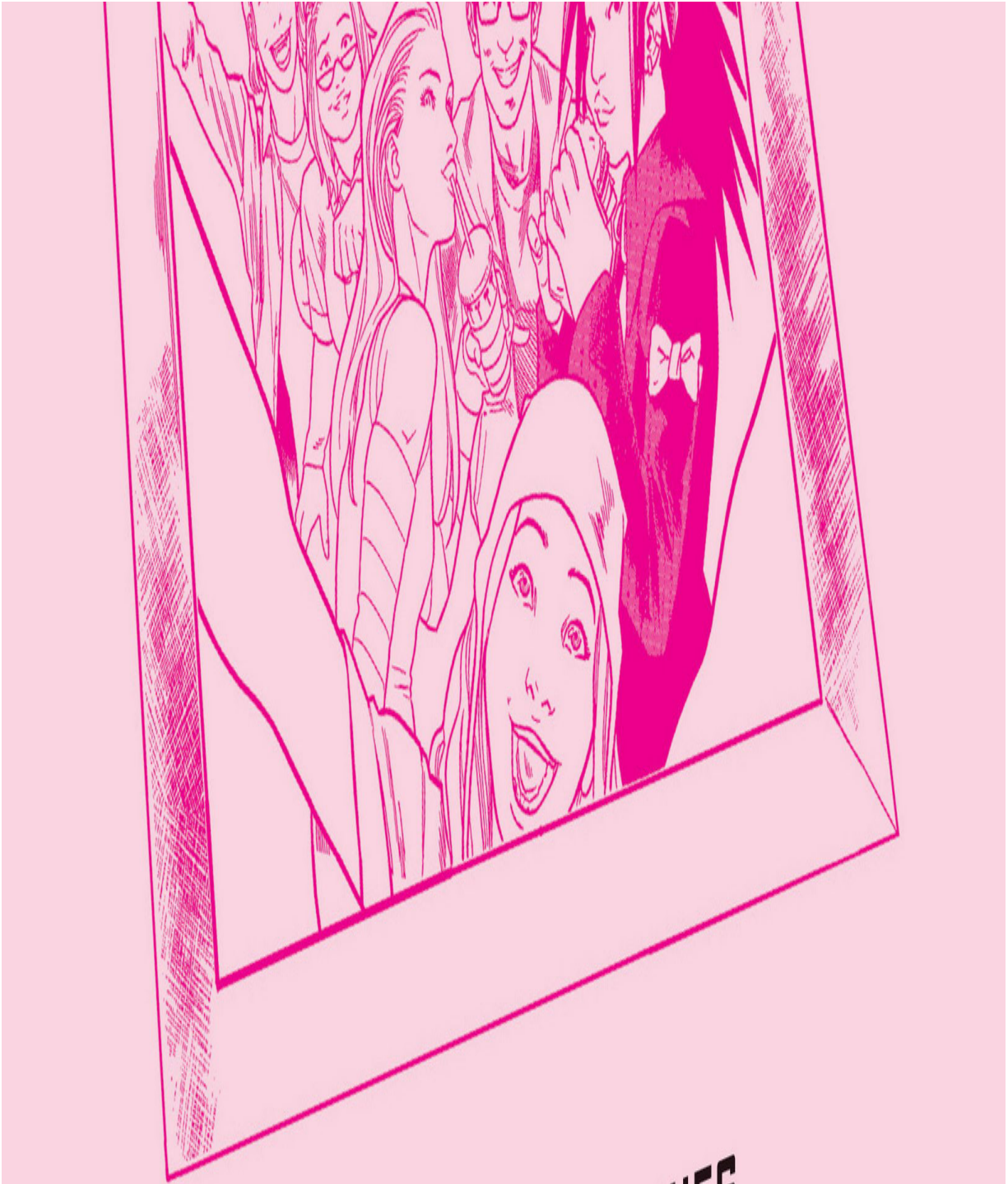












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IN THE ALWAYS COMIC SERIES!**

**IN THE RUNAWAYS**

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**Christopher Golden** is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Snowblind*, *Ararat*, *Tin Men*, and many other novels. His young adult novels have appeared on YALSA's Best Books for Reluctant Readers list and been honored by the New York Public Library. With Mike Mignola, he cocreated two cult favorite comic book series, *Baltimore* and *Joe Golem: Occult Detective*. Golden has also written numerous media tie-in novels, including the *first ever* original novels featuring the X-Men, Hellboy, Daredevil, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Sons of Anarchy, and more. He cohosts two podcasts, *Three Guys with Beards* and *Defenders Dialogue*. He can be found online at [www.christophergolden.com](http://www.christophergolden.com) as well as on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.